

KERALA HUGGED

Munnar/Kochi/Alleppey/Varkala

-Ankur Mutreja

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Editorial Review

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Review Rating: 5 stars!

Reviewed By Mamta Madhavan for **Readers' Favorite**

Kerala Hugged: Munnar/Kochi/Alleppey/Varkala by Ankur Mutreja is a travelogue that takes readers on an interesting trip to Kochi, Alleppey, Munnar, and Varkala in Kerala along with the author and lets them discover the natural beauty of this place, which lies at the southernmost tip of India. The book captures the sights and sounds of each location, the places of interest there, and the author's memories as a tourist that made the trip memorable. The author's description of the places and his memories will make any reader want to pack their bags, take a trip to Kerala, and experience the abundance of natural beauty that has given it the title "God's Own Country."

The author speaks about the places in detail, and the color pictures shared in the book make his descriptions vivid and real and help readers connect well with the places and his words. Be it the hills of Munnar, the houseboat and backwater experience at Alleppey, the beaches of Varkala, or the crowded lanes of Fort Kochi, and the other tourist attractions, the author speaks about the diversity of the place extensively. For all those planning a trip to Kerala, this book is perfect as it will help them in deciding what to see, which places to visit, and what to expect while traveling in Kerala.

I enjoyed the book immensely as it is honest, and the author's writing style is simple and neat, making it easy for readers to understand. On the whole the book is an excellent travelogue and it brings alive the beauty of the places effectively.

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About the Author



Ankur Mutreja is a writer by choice and an advocate by profession, which choice he exercises best while writing on travel. Though he has been writing on travel in piecemeal manner, this book is his first travelogue. He has also been writing on other varied topics for last more than a decade through his blogs, which are accessible from his website. In 2015, he converted his blogs into a book entitled "[Writings @ Ankur Mutreja](#)" and derived three other titles from it: "[Sparks: Satire and Reviews](#)", "[Flare: Opinions \(Law, Human Rights and Politics\)](#)", and "[Light: Philosophy](#)". He has also published a short book of poems entitled "[Nine Poems](#)" in the same year. His main areas of interest in the writing arena are Travel, Reviews, Satire, Poems, Opinions and Philosophy. Of course, other than these, he does lots of legal writing too.

Other than writing and travel, Ankur likes books, music, news, internet, and jogging, and recently he has rekindled his love for biking. Ankur doesn't open up easily, but on peeling a few difficult layers, he may turn out to be a sweet, soft pulp -- it depends entirely on you; he just reflects. Try your luck at:

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Prologue

In a borderless world, all would be travelers indeed. India is a small borderless world in itself, and Kerala lies at the southernmost tip. I live almost near the lovely Kashmir, but does that make Kerala any less lovely! This book is indeed my baby born out of my love of nature.

Writing books is the closest men ever came to having children.

--Norman Mailer

Kerala is beautiful not only because of "God" but also because of the people who have made Kerala their home. I went there as a parasite in the disguise of a tourist and sucked all I could in a short span of 23 days. But did anybody ever complain? No, never. I think they believe the joy multiplies by sharing, and hereby I emulate them.

It started reluctantly in the midst of court appearances in Delhi courts in a busy September. Don't know how and when I boarded the Kerala Express, which left me in Kochi to enliven my life forever. Kochi is the place to discover yourself, your life and the world beautiful around you. How? Discover inside.

I, having been discovered, headed to Alleppey. Not to relax in the luxury of backwaters but to learn how they keep it so beautiful. Of course, I had to merge into them to discover their world. Snake boat races epitomize the best of their lives, so very different from that of ours own. You can learn it only if you become part of it. I did try my luck. Did I succeed? Discover inside.

Can you fall in love at 40? Yes for sure if you are in Munnar. The one I fell in love with was very special. Who was she? Was she a sexy Keralan? a pretty French? a bold German? a speedy American? a frank Britisher? a thinking Russian? a cute Chinese? a shy Pakistani? or, all of them merged into one? What happened to our love story? Do we meet even now? Or were there heart breaks? Discover inside.

Who says it is necessary to work to live? Definitely not if you are in Varkala! You can relax, think, observe, do no work, yet live a life. And it is so very simple! The nature itself helps you in it. How exactly? Well discover inside.

Munnar: Love

Love at First Sight

Generally, wherever I travel, I enquire about the property prices. I didn't do it in Munnar, and how much I repent it! Who knows I might be having the wherewithal to own a little part of that heaven called Munnar. Unfortunately, for that little mistake, I will have to just admire that beauty, not own it. On second thoughts, nobody has ever owned that beauty: Britishers, Tata or tourists like me. The tea planters, the tea workers, the tea exporters, *et al*, have all merged into a cohesive one and are protecting and enhancing the beauty with sincere admiration. And what a job they have done! Munnar is the beauty incarnated, and she was indeed playful:

I hardly started to admire her that she draped herself in clouds.

Playful she was, but shy she wasn't.

Announcing love, the clouds receded, and she smiled in jest.

Alas! I only gazed her. Too pretty to be near! Too alluring to be far!



Munnar sight seeing is guided by various viewpoints; Lockhart Gap Viewpoint, Top Station Viewpoint, Photo Point, Echo Point, Shooting Point, Pothamedu Viewpoint, etc., but these are helpful only for those who are blinded to beauty. In Munnar, wherever you stand is a

viewpoint. If you are lucky, you book your hotel away from the town in the laps of the beauty; i.e, Chinnakanal, Devikulam, Suryanelli, Poopada, Yellapetty, Anachal, Pothamedu, etc. If you are luckier, you hire a bike for sight seeing and mark your viewpoints on the way. And if you are the luckiest, you also take your bike to far flung places like Thekkady, Wayanad, Ooty, Kodaikanal, etc.

(Well...I fall in the last category; yes, the luckiest! I booked my hotel in Suryanelli, 22 km away from the town in the midst of tea gardens. I rented a bike and was able to convince them to let me ride the bike not only in and around Munnar but also to Thekkady and back.)

Though the viewpoints were more or less superfluous, but the distances weren't. Top Station Viewpoint, as the name suggest, is located at a great height and is so to help people get the best view of the hills. But what interested me the most was the downhill slope from Top Station to Kundala Dam. The road was surrounded by tea gardens on both sides, and a very pleasant breeze flew all throughout without differentiating between the beautiful gardens and the ugly petrol/diesel vehicles. Luckily for me, my bike had touched reserve, and I decided to ride the slope with the breeze sans petrol, and what an experience it was. It felt as if it was not a ride but a flight in the laps of the nature, with a little cuddle here and a little cuddle there in between the delicate tosses from one lap to another. You can experience this anywhere and everywhere in Munnar with a little sensitivity, and which I indeed did throughout my stay in Munnar.

Just a caveat: don't try it at night because not just you but your bike also enjoys these cuddles and turns its eyes off sans petrol, which, instead of tossing between laps, can actually bump you off the road, and that can indeed be very risky on hills -- it did happen to me; I jumped off the bike; only miraculously she halted in screech, and how I ashamed I felt on abandoning her, with whom I would soon fall in love.



Other than viewpoints, Munnar has waterfalls: Chinnakanal, Lakkam, Attukal, Nyayamakad, Kuthumkal, Cheeyappara, Valara, Thoovanam, etc. Chinnakanal waterfalls was my next door neighbor, and I fell so much in love with her that I didn't look any further; so, I don't really know who is the prettiest. Of course, you can checkout all of them, or, like me, shower all your love on just one. Either way you stay happy as they love us all irrespective of age, sex, caste, creed, color or race.



There are at least three dams in and around Munnar with adjoining lakes; Mattupetty, Kundala, and Anayirangal; I visited all of them but couldn't boat in any. Mattupetty only had speed boats, which were

available for couples and families only ð I tried arguing I am dating Munnar, but those money-minded _____ didn't understand it. At Kundala, the two boats were so much in love with each other, I just couldn't disturb them. And, at Anayirangal, the rains scared my wits, and I drove my bike right into the lake, more or less, and of course this is no way to make love.



However, the place where I did make love was Blossom Park. It is a nice park with flowers, rocks, water bodies, etc, but the thing which attracted me the most was the fish SPA. It is not just one but many fishes, who kiss, cuddle and tickle you (and sometimes even bite you) till you start blushing red. And if you are lucky, you may also get some very good company from your own species, ready to bare it all for you. The name of the fish was Garrarufa, and the damage: 200 bucks for 15 minutes; the only time I have paid for love.

Enough of love! Now time for some knowledge at Tea Museum. Tea is grown at a height of 3000-3750 ft at a slope of 30-45%. It doesn't compete with any other produce; therefore, the Indian rulers of that time gave apparent uncultivable land to the Britishers, on which they set up tea plantation by 1880. They employed migrant TAMILIAN men as laborers and their wives as tea pluckers. Till they rode their first bike in 1909, they had

been using rail road, which, but for the floods of 1924, would have been in use even now. Nevertheless, they also built a ropeway connecting Munnar to Top Station. They introduced maternity and health benefits much before the legislation demanded them to do it, and after independence, the Indian managers took over. In 1976, Tata bought over the British company Finlay, and, in 1983, changed the name to Tata Tea. As the fate would have it, even Tata exited in 2005 handing over the control to the employees, who renamed the company as Kannan Devan Hills Plantation Co. Pvt. Ltd. It is now the largest participatory management company in India with more than 12,500 employees as shareholders. All the above from the exhibits at the Museum and the documentary I saw therein, which the majority left in the middle.



The rest below from my first hand experience of the tea manufacturing process in the factory replica created in the museum complex. The tea leaves plucked by beautiful hands are sorted and run through a series of cutters turning them into small granules, which are then oxidized in an oxidation chamber and discharged into the drying chamber at 104 degree centigrade after a wait of 40 minutes. Then the finest granules are collected in big bags in a tedious process, are separated into various categories, are packed, and are then sold in the market, including

the one existing just next to the shop floor selling everything two for the price of one. And if you are still not asleep, have a nice sip at the vending machine. Enjoy your tea! After that we will go on a long drive.

Dating the Gorgeous

By then, I had already fallen in love with the bike too. When I went to return her, I made all excuses but the truth that I have fallen in love □ had I disclosed it, probably, it would have been easier. They were very protective about her. They wanted to protect her from the prying eyes of the police, wild animals, unscrupulous mechanics, *et al.* I assured them of my capability to protect her from the world. In fact, I always carry my fitness certificates along, which I promptly presented to them in drills comprising 100 push-ups, 100 pull-ups, 200 sit-ups, and a 21 km half marathon. So assured, they finally allowed me to take her into the jungles of Periyar Tiger Reserve, Thekkady. Actually, their concerns were not unfounded. The business works with the help and connivance of the police, and they had no access to the police in Thekkady, which was a different police station. Moreover, Thekkady is next to Tamil Nadu, where lechery/corruption is more widespread.

The trip started on the known paths, for I have been tracking 20 km of it everyday in my trip to and fro to my hotel. There were 90 km more of it, out of which 15 km till Poopada were dreamlike. I was residing so near to this unexplored part of heaven and didn't even know about it. These 15 km were mostly downhill, which I covered in no less than 2 hrs because I had already learned the art of getting tossed around in the laps of nature, and there was no way I was going to miss this opportunity. Indeed, I switched off the engine and let the hill breeze guide the navigation of my bike. In Kerala, cows are killed for food; so, they have turned rebels. They deliberately cross the roads in front of the speeding vehicles bringing the vehicles to a screeching halt. However, if you ride the slope sans petrol, they don't interfere, for they recognize your love for the Mother Nature

and don't feel threatened. Their confidence is not misplaced, for they are well recognized mothers themselves. *Gau Rakshaks*: there are better ways of loving mother than killing people.



The exciting ride started after Poopada. It suddenly started pouring heavily, very heavily. There was no way I could have stopped after having taken almost 4 hrs in covering a short distance till Poopada -- had I stopped then, I would have never reached Thekkady. So, I drove in the rains on the hills. The road was slippery to say the least, and I had to ride at the speed of around 40 km/hr to reach Thekkady in next two hours before it was night. In addition to that, I didn't even have a proper helmet with a face protection, and the rain wouldn't stop for a minute for the next two hours. I came to a conclusion that this was the punishment of □ God □ for flirting too much with its own property Kerala (□ God's own country □). I had no option but to trust my beloved bike, who I must say didn't betray my trust. Steep hills, slippery roads, unexpected bumps, dark turns, narrow escapes, and muddy encounters: she did it all, in the rain, without complaining even once; that's what you call a good partner. I had almost started feeling guilty for not being a good protector, but if the love is mutual, you hardly need to protect. For record, I passed through

Devikulam, Poopada, Nedumkandam, and Kumily on my way to Thekkady, and this is the most scenic route possible.

Yes, the police did try to play spoilsport. They stopped me and my bike on a false accusation that I had no license. Basically, they were acting moral police, trying to separate two love birds on false notions of societal norms. But I am also a lawyer. I gave them a lecture on criminal law, family law and uniform civil code. It seems it was the last challenge of the "God", but he doesn't know he also has to go to courts to get his property rights invoked. Indeed, I and my bike together beat the "God" .



The Villain

Let me say at the outset, this portion is going to be unsightly. I completely failed to nail the tiger. Leaving aside the tiger, I didn't spot any wild cat of any denomination in the tiger reserve. I agree I didn't go for the tiger trail program, but I did go for bamboo rafting and was expecting to spot at least some wild animals. The program was expensive at 2000 bucks, for it was very badly conducted by an incompetent guide. Adding to that the racial discrimination; I had one of the worst experiences. I have decided not to share the racial discrimination experience, but I would definitely advice you not to participate in any of

the heavily marketed programs conducted by Periyar Tiger Reserve. Just go for the nature walk or the boat ride and don't spend more than half a day in the reserve unless you have some insider information on how to experience wildlife in Periyar at Thekkady. I have heard good reviews about jeep safari at GAVI, which is nearly 40 km from Thekkady, costing nearly the same as bamboo rafting, but, unfortunately, I chose bamboo rafting; so, I can't illuminate you on GAVI.



I did send a terse feedback-cum-complaint to the Field Director, (Project Tiger), on his email id, with the threat of going public on no response. Nobody has responded; so, the email is reproduced below:

This is to bring it to your kind attention that your program Bamboo Rafting (Full Day) at Periyar Tiger Reserve is being conducted by a very incompetent guide, who identified himself as Pandian (Photograph attached). I attended this program today, i.e. 22.09.16, in a group comprising 13 people, and I am sorry to say my experience was very bad. It felt as if I have been cheated of my money. The guide would talk to only a few people in the front and was almost inaudible at the end of the queue. He was not carrying any binoculars and actually borrowed a zoom camera from one of the guests to locate and identify a wild animal, which incidentally he couldn't. He would concentrate more on identifying and explaining flora than fauna. In fact, in the whole trip lasting about 8 hrs, we spotted only a herd of elephants, that too without any

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