

TRAVEL

Fresh air and the forest experience in Thodupuzha

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Jaison Joseph Elayidom, a design consultant, has developed his half-acre property in Kerala to let guests trek, eat local cuisine and get plenty of fresh air



A typical Kerala lunch out of a banana leaf *pothi* (parcel) enjoyed beside a stream after a trek through a forest is part of an ‘experience’ packaged by Jaison Joseph Elayidom. The property, Ela Forest, in Velloor, is around six kilometres from his hometown Thodupuzha, near Kochi. The half-acre plot in Velloor that borders the Kerala State Government’s reserve forest is Jaison’s attempt at ‘developing’ a place for tourists to experience ‘forest and fresh air’. He got the project up and running during the pandemic.

Having bought the property a year-and-a-half ago, he got down to working on it seriously during lockdown. He got stuck for 45 days in Bengaluru when he went there on a work trip. “Cooped up in a hotel room with no company but the phone, my thoughts were all about being able to breathe fresh air. I started getting work done remotely, coordinating with friends,” he says. His friend Mitta Sunny is his business partner and the place was ready in September.

He does not like to call it a resort, for him it is simply a forest. “Offbeat popular spots in Kerala such as Meesapulimala in Munnar, were discovered by off-roaders and riding enthusiasts. It means there are many other beautiful places in our own backyard,” he says.

A viewing

When he started looking around for a plot with this idea in mind, Jaison wanted one with little to no access even to electricity and water. “A *kucha* road was good enough, we could get water and electricity there. A real estate agent told me this list was a first,” he says.

He also wants to involve the local community. He consciously involved them right from the start – from clearing rubber trees to building a tree house, the highlight of the property.

“Trekking is an activity here but I am not equipped to guide trekkers. I do not know the forest unlike a local who would know everything from the flora to the routes inside. It generates employment, while creating a sense of being invested,” explains Jaison.

Since it is a day-long picnic spot, food is provided at the location. It is prepared by families who live nearby or on the trek route. “This is an income for them; what we charge for food is handed over to these families as they buy the supplies and do the cooking,” Jaison says. There is a regular

and grand menu, food can be ordered a la carte. Dishes include local specialities made of pork and fresh-water fish. All meals and tea-time snacks have been catered for.

Jaison is in the process of building rooms within the frame of the tree house – the frame is made of iron – making it three-tiered. He has used bamboo for the décor. For now, he takes on day trips; once the rooms are ready there would be the option of staying. A design consultant for IBS, an IT company in Infopark (Kochi), Jaison designed the property himself.

The USP he says is the ‘forest experience’ – trekking, off-roading and exploring – with a taste of Kerala. “No cold, no fog...just a forest. We can trek some distance into the reserve forest to Kaithapara, watch the Velloor *puzha* (river) flow by...” he says.

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