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FRESHLY GROUND HEAVEN

A nation of tea drinkers, India loves its hot, sugary, milky *chai*. But while tea is the country's most popular drink – especially in North India – it is coffee that reigns supreme in the coffee-growing states of the south. Here, it is more than a drink and something of a cultural icon

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An old-world coffee poster in the Indian Coffee House at their original location on Mahatma Gandhi Road, before its move to current location on Church Street



Prepping the beverage and fuel for the day

n South India, early morning is a time for rituals. Prayers are recited and religious idols decorated with flowers. Women draw delicate patterns called *rangoli* on their doorsteps while brisk morning walkers stride by. Making coffee is another morning ritual. A generous dose of 'filter coffee' is decocted in a special stainless steel filter, mixed with generous amounts of milk and sugar, and served in a traditional metal cup set in a deep saucer. This is repeated around 4 or 5pm and savoured with the same reverence as the first early morning cup. This coffee ritual is so important that a common afternoon greeting in Bangalore is: "Coffee aitha?" (Had your coffee?)

EVOLVING CULTURE

During the seven years I spent in Bangalore, I observed not only how much South Indians love their coffee, but also how new influences and trends were causing a slow transformation in the city's coffee culture. While the older residents sipped from metal tumblers of filter coffee while standing at roadside eateries called *darshinis*, the younger, well-heeled crowd preferred to sit down to a ceramic cup of *caffè macchiato* in air-conditioned comfort at one of the numerous new trendy cafés.

When I first arrived, my neighbourhood had a local branch of India's home-grown chain Café Coffee Day, but a new foreign

chain would appear almost every month. First it was Australia's Gloria Jean's, followed by Caffè Pascucci from Italy, and before long the UK's Costa Coffee had cafés scattered across the city. Illy café opened a branch at the new airport and by the time I was leaving India, things had come full circle with the inevitable arrival of Starbucks.

Young people especially celebrate the arrival of these international coffee chains for their atmosphere, free WiFi, and dizzying menus of espressos and frappuccinos. At a Starbucks in the upmarket neighbourhood of Koramangala, Gaurav, an engineer from Delhi tells me why he's a regular here: "I'm a fan because of the décor and the quiet ambience allows you to take a break from the noisy streets outside and chill with friends. I especially love their



Clockwise from top: Vandana Hotel on Cubbonpet Main Road has its share of regular coffee drinkers; view of the Bettadakhan coffee estate nestled in the hills of the Baba Budangiri; any time is a good time for a cuppa at this small coffee bar; different coffee varieties waiting to be graded and tasted

frappuccinos. Prices here are quite heavy on the pocket with no drink under 100 rupees, but I don't mind spending this once a month." But even among the young, there are fans of South Indian filter coffee who prefer to stick to their long-time neighbourhood favourites. "I go for my cup of coffee at any *darshini*," says Shubha, a Bangalore native. "They have the best coffee because it's authentic filter coffee, piping hot, and costs just 7 to 10 rupees. It's the satisfaction of having a good cup of coffee."

As stylish cafés proliferate across India, coffee's place as a beloved drink has been reinforced. Consumption is steadily rising, not only in the south, but increasingly in tea-loving North India where this new foreign version of coffee culture has also caught on in a big way.



INDIA'S CAPITAL OF COFFEE

Bangalore is the capital of Karnataka, India's largest coffee producer, but it is also the country's de facto 'coffee capital'. Home to the Coffee Board of India, this is where the country's coffee decision-makers are. The first regional chapter of the Indian Coffee Workers' Cooperative opened here in 1957, managing the much-loved India Coffee House, a city landmark whose old-world charm remained unchanged for 52 years before being forced to move to a new location. This is also where the very first branch of Café Coffee Day opened on bustling Brigade Road in the city's commercial centre in 1996. Today the popular Indian chain has 1,500 cafés in 200 towns and cities across the country, serving more than 300,000 coffee lovers every day.

The rolling hills of Karnataka's Chikmagalur district, just 250km north-west of Bangalore, are believed to be the birthplace of Indian coffee. According to a local legend, it is in these hills that Baba Budan, a 16th-century Sufi, planted the seven coffee beans he brought from Yemen on his way back from the Hajj. Today his shrine sits on top of one of the highest peaks, which has been named after him: Baba Budangiri. It was in the mid-18th century that the British first experimented with coffee-growing here, with the first plantation established in 1840 near this legendary hill. Today 70 per cent of India's coffee is grown in three regions of Karnataka: Chikmagalur, Hassan and Coorg, while the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are India's other traditional coffee-growing regions.

GROWN IN THE SHADE

There are many aspects of South Indian coffee that make it exceptionally unique: from how it's grown to the way it's prepared (see page 27). This uniqueness starts at the roots of the coffee plant. "What is particular about coffee production in India is that it is one of the only places where it is sustainable," explains conservationist Dr Arshya Bose. "In other parts of the world, forests are cut down to plant coffee. What is unique in India is that coffee grows in the forest. One hundred per cent of coffee



Clockwise from top: Sunalini Menon putting grades of coffee to the test at the Coffeelab; a display of coffee paraphernalia collected from across the globe during Menon's travels; The Square is one of Cafe Coffee Day's premium cafes in town; brewed for tasting

grown here is shade-grown." I saw proof of this on Ajoy Thipaiah's 110-hectare coffee estate in Chikmagalur, where native hardwood trees and different varieties of wild fig trees provide a natural canopy for the coffee plants. The shade protects these plants from fluctuating temperatures, and soil erosion is prevented during the monsoon season, while the mulch provided by the trees conserves moisture and provides nutrients to the soil. Of course, some sunlight is required for optimal growth. "We cut one third of the shade cover each year," explains Thipaiah, "so that we have a 50-60 per cent ratio of shade and sunlight."

A UNIQUE FLAVOUR

South Indian coffee has a pleasantly mild taste, which is not too acidic and is sweet on the palate. Just as the quality of a good wine varies depending on where, how and when the grapes are grown and processed,

coffee quality is also dependent on factors like origin, elevation, bean size, soil quality and age. And like wine, a good coffee says something about its terroir, the natural environment it was grown in: its characteristic flavour is a result of the soil and climate, but can also be influenced by other types of trees and plants growing in the vicinity. "Coffee grown on a plantation with fruit trees like orange and sapota (sapodilla) can result in a sweeter, creamier cup," explains Bangalore-based coffee specialist and expert taster Sunalini Menon. I watch as she sniffs, sips, slurps and spits her way through a tasting, calling out her impressions of the brew as her assistant swiftly takes notes. "Very bright." "Aromatic." "Lots of citrus fruit." "A bit of floral notes."

I ask what is particular about the taste of South Indian coffee. "If I take the S.795, for example, which is an Arabica variety that is produced in large quantities in India, it has lots of hints of chocolate, caramel and cacao," Menon explains. These hints of flavours are part of the coffee's unique taste, but taste is not all about terroir. According to Menon, the degree of roast is an important aspect in the development of flavour: "We don't take our coffee through a dark roast like in some parts of the world," she clarifies. "In Italy for instance, it's a very dark roast; they're used to the espresso roast. We like the medium roast.



And our beans are perhaps not as hard as the beans you get in other parts of the world, so we don't need that much energy to roast it." Another important component that gives South Indian coffee its particularity is the addition of chicory. While coffee purists shun the addition of the ground root of this herbaceous plant to coffee, those who are accustomed to its flavour can't do without it. This is not surprising: chicory adds a pleasant caramel-like flavour to coffee and increases its potency.

DEMAND VERSUS YIELD

According to the London-based International Coffee Organization, world demand for coffee is set to jump 25 per cent in the next five years. The world is drinking more coffee, and so is India, where consumption has been steadily growing every year: from 60,000 tonnes in 2000, this figure doubled to 120,000 in 2014. At the same time, local coffee growers are experiencing decreasing yields. Most plantations like the one I visited are owned by small farmers who have been in the coffee business for generations. "We've been severely hit by climate change for the past four to five years," Thipaiah says. "Last year we had a prolonged summer and a delayed onset of the monsoon. These changing weather patterns have had a very severe impact on productivity and production has now dropped. Socio-economic



FILTERING THE PERFECT BREW

To prepare a good cuppa, the traditional South Indian coffee filter is indispensable. This stainless steel contraption has two compartments, which sit on top of each other. The coffee grinds are spooned inside the upper one which has a perforated bottom, and a filter press, which looks like an inverted umbrella, is placed on top. The upper compartment fits into the lower one, which collects the brewed coffee that slowly trickles through the tiny holes once hot water is poured inside the top container. Milk mixed with sugar is heated and once this is piping hot, it is added to the coffee. The mixture is poured back and forth with an elegant swooping motion, aerating the liquid, and creating small bubbles, which lock in the aromas released when the coffee is sipped.

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From top: Young women enjoying their coffee at the Starbucks outlet at Bangalore's Phoenix Market City mall; the old-world interiors of the original Indian Coffee House



changes also affect production, especially the migration of local labour to cities. Our berries are handpicked and at harvest time I have a hard time finding enough workers."

With coffee consumption on the rise and diminishing crops, plantations may not be able to keep up with demand. Dr K. Basavaraj, Divisional Head and Quality Specialist at the Indian Coffee Board, reveals that imports and the expansion of production may be future solutions: "Though we currently produce enough coffee to cover the domestic market, in the future we may have to import coffee. We do already import some from Vietnam and Indonesia, which is used to make instant coffee and then exported. Also, cultivation has been expanding in non-traditional growing areas in the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and the North-Eastern states."

FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
Meanwhile, adopting the clear-cutting practices of other coffee-growing countries to create full-sun plantations is clearly not the answer. Menon explains why this is not the long-term solution: "If we chop down the trees, yields will be fabulously high. But we'll eventually lose on two counts: one, by increasing productivity the soil will be depleted six or

seven years down the line and we'll have a drop in production. Two, pests and diseases will increase and plants will be lost. We cannot grow coffee without shade in India." Dr Bose the conservationist however fears for the trees, claiming that some plantations have been tempted into intensifying their production and forest cover, and native tree species are being lost as a result. Increasing consumption patterns are clearly having an effect on the local environment, raising questions about future sustainability.

Still, when I recently returned

to Bangalore, I noticed a new coffee trend as soon as I stepped outside the airport. There are now half a dozen new, shiny Indian coffee chains resembling the fancy foreign cafés, but instead of ceramic cups of expensive lattes and machiattos, they serve something you could never find at a Starbucks or even Café Coffee Day: authentic home-grown filter coffee. Served in the humble stainless steel cup. My return couldn't have been sweeter.

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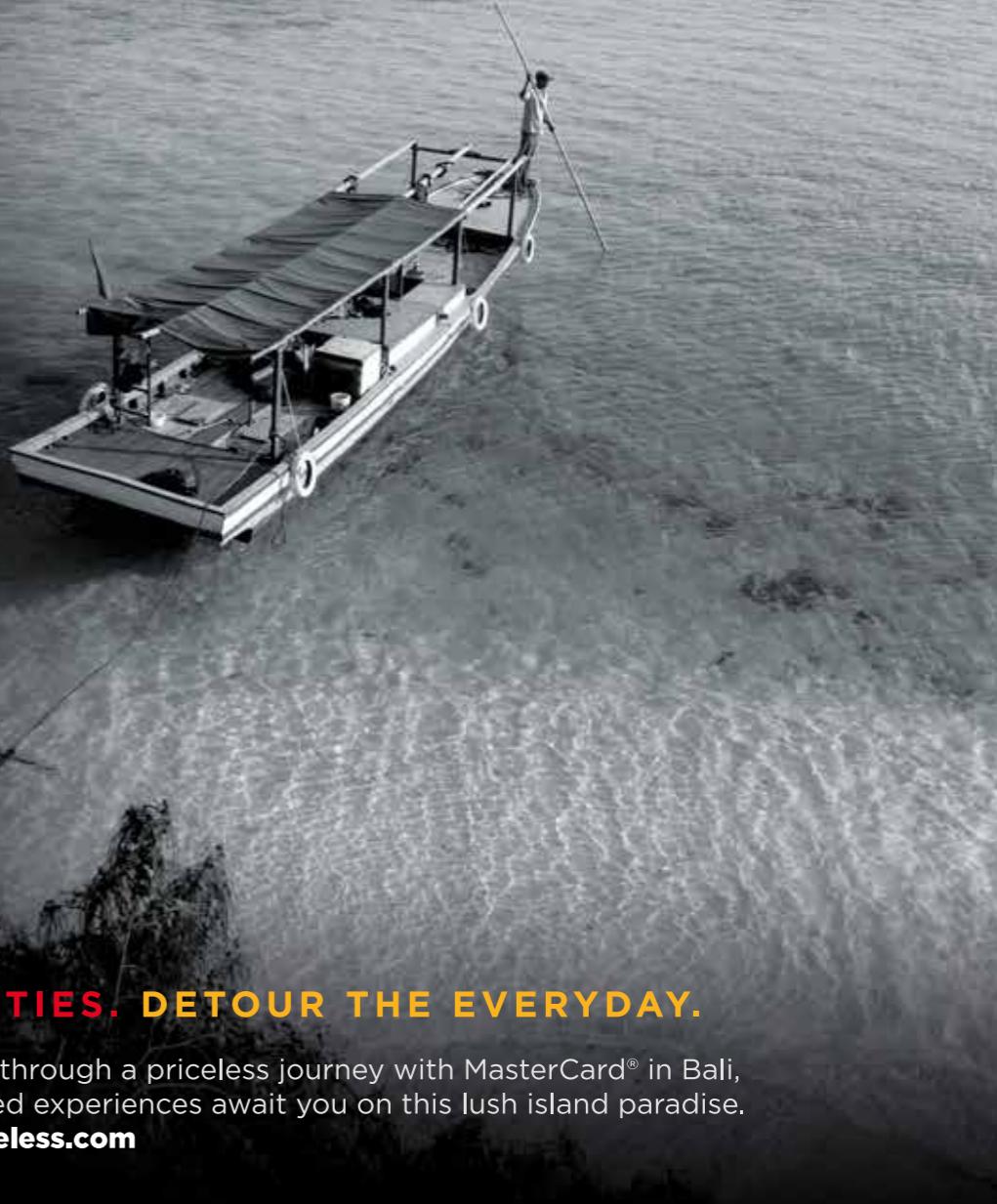
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