

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE Dating from the eighteenth century, Rajakkad's Pallam Palace was relocated from the neighbouring state of Kerala. The estate is situated in the Palani Hills. The hotel's dining area opens directly on to the garden



RAJAKKAD

Continuing our series on small, off-the-radar hotels, **Susan Crewe** uncovers a secluded, elegantly simple getaway in southern India

The comments in the visitors' book at Rajakkad give a true flavour of the place. The words 'paradise', 'birdsong', 'house party' and 'welcome' occur frequently. Several entries reveal that their authors had stayed for a week or more and some had started or finished a writing or painting project. One departing guest had added the postscript: 'Keep this place quite, quite secret and protected.' On account of this, I am feeling slightly guilty about revealing the details of the self-styled garden hotel in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, to which I lost my heart.

Set at an elevation of 1,000 metres among the forested slopes of the Palani Hills, the seven-bedroom mini palace is at the heart of an estate that encompasses a coffee and pepper plantation, a lake and a small farm. The climate at this altitude is cooler and fresher than down on the plains - think hill station in the days of the British Raj - and the estate mercifully free of mosquitoes. The hotel itself is indeed an eighteenth-century palace, albeit a miniature one. Originating in the neighbouring state of Kerala, Pallam Palace has been dismantled and reassembled on two occasions, its many thousand interlocking wooden pieces forming an exquisite, single-storey building of shady courtyards where gentle breezes play over the surfaces of internal pools.

Each of the seven bedrooms opens directly on to the garden and is pretty, comfortable and elegantly simple - and entirely free of anything

that could be termed high-tech. Indeed, although there is Wi-Fi, it might be wise not to count on it, and it would be even wiser to turn every electronic device off, and luxuriate in the surrounding beauty and serenity.

Guests are diverse, ranging from the aforementioned writers and painters to birdwatchers, walkers and sightseers taking a break from a temple-packed itinerary - those of Madurai and Palani are the closest. You could, of course, use Rajakkad as a base from which to make expeditions, but its magic lies in the tranquillity of the immediate surroundings, the opportunity to laze, to hike through river gorges and over wooded escarpments, to swim in rock pools, to visit small villages, to picnic, to botanise or to catch a rare glimpse of a golden oriole or a green bee-eater. The hotel is run like a private house with the owner, Francis Fry, a considerate and welcoming host. Meals are communal

and the delicious food is predominantly south Indian, with most of the ingredients coming from the estate itself.

Rajakkad's luxury isn't of the shiny touch-of-a-button, room-service kind, but rather of a deeply civilised, inside-track kind, where your hosts are well informed and friendly, where you can be as sociable or as solitary as you like and as idle or as energetic as the mood takes you. You may even leave a comment in the visitors' book suggesting that only the most discriminating of your friends should be told about this jewel of a garden hotel ☐

WAYS AND MEANS

Susan Crewe travelled as a guest of The Ultimate Travel Company (020-3051 8098; www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk), which specialises in bespoke trips to India, including flights and private transport throughout. Rooms at Rajakkad (www.rajakkadestate.com) cost from INR7,500-INR11,000 (approx £75-£110) per night, full board. The hotel can also be rented exclusively as a whole. For other small, boutique hotels in India, contact Mahout (www.mahoutuk.com).