



FEATURES

Star of India

The remote Andaman Islands are not where you'd expect to find the planet's coolest new hotel. Martin Hemming didn't want to leave

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Top marks: Beach No 7, on Havelock Island (Sharad Medhavi/Getty)

Obviously, journalists never make mistakes. Least of all travel journalists. But I just made a howler.

A week-long trip to the Andaman Islands was all my own idea, and sounded suitably long and luxuriant. What I hadn't fully factored in was, first, just how flipping long it would take to get to them: a 10-hour flight to Chennai (Madras), an overnight layover, a two-hour domestic flight, a two-hour ferry ride and a 20-minute trundle in a 4x4. Add the same again, in reverse, on the way home, and that eats into one's annual leave.

Second, I wildly — naively, foolishly — underestimated just how perfectly, heart-singly beautiful and lovely the Andamans were going to be. My timetable gave me just four nights there. On the final night, as the ceiling fan phut-phutted above my antique brass bed at the new Jalakara hotel, I admit it: I was close to tears. Why hadn't I come for longer?

If you can accurately stick a pin in the globe where the Andaman Islands are, then I want you for my pub quiz team. There are 300 Andamans floating in the Bay of Bengal, not many of them inhabited. They're nearer Burma, but are part of India, though they merit only a few pages in the back of my India guidebook. They make an appearance in the Sherlock Holmes story *The Sign of Four*, in which the locals are described as "fierce, morose, and intractable", as well as "naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small eyes, and distorted features". Which isn't very nice. That said, sail too close to North Sentinel Island and you won't be invited in for tea. The Sentinelese are one of the few remaining uncontacted tribes on the planet. In 2006, two fishermen whose boat accidentally washed up on their shore were murdered, then buried in shallow graves. When a coastguard helicopter attempted to retrieve the bodies, it was met with a volley of Sentinelese arrows.

I stayed on Havelock Island, which — to set your mind at rest — has no indigenous population. (Entering tribal land without permission is illegal.) In fact, nobody lived on Havelock much before 1947, when Bengali Hindus were resettled here after Partition. It's the only Andaman geared up to show tourists a good time. You get there by modern catamaran or, if you're unlucky, rusting government ferry from the capital, Port Blair, where there's no need to hang about, unless you want to wallow in postcolonial guilt at the Cellular Jail, built by the British in 1906 to house enemies of the Raj. You could also, if you really wanted to, hire a tuk-tuk to take you to Corbyn's Cove, along what nobody is calling the Labour Leader Scenic Drive. Ironically, Corbyn Cove is some way to the right of Port Blair.

As the handful of backpackers from my boat headed off down one road to find a hut on the beach for the night, I headed west on Havelock's second and only other road. By the roadside, dive shops advertised learn-to-scuba sessions for a hardly reassuring £15. Betel nuts lay spread on tarpaulins to dry in the beating sun. One-room homes had walls made of woven palm leaves. As fields returned to jungle, a hand-painted sign pointed to the turn-off for Elephant Beach. We slowed down for some roadworks: a shirtless bloke, a wheelbarrow and a shovel.

Until recently, the Barefoot resort, at the road's end, was the poshest place to stay on Havelock, a ring of eco-friendly thatched cottages and canvas tents in a jungle clearing (cottages from £110, tents from £78; barefoot-andaman.com). It's mainly Italians and Germans who make it this far. "All our guests stay for at least six days," said the resort's manager, Sanjeev Kumar — my first indication that I'd undercooked my stay. "Twenty per cent stay for a month."

And you understand why when you walk just a little way through towering, ancient trees to Beach No 7. Rubbish name, insanely wonderful strip of sand. This is Havelock's standout, but you'll hardly grumble at beaches Nos 1 through 6, either. No 7 is long, empty and — perhaps a surprise in India — litter-free, backed by succulent jungle, its surface decorated with weird concentric patterns made by tiny crabs, which I couldn't help but think were trying to reveal some sort of essential truth about the universe.

It wasn't even 5pm and the sun was setting. (The Andamans are stuck on Indian time, which means early to rise and early to bed. Even on the backpacker hang-out of Beach No 5, the plug's pulled on any party at 11pm.) Towards the southern end of the beach, Indian tourists gathered with selfie sticks and long trousers to take in the spectacle. Few ventured into the bath-warm waves, but that's no more peculiar a way to behave on a beach than the pale-skinned Europeans sprawled in extreme UV in the same spot the following afternoon.

On the face of it, Havelock offers the clichéd holiday-island shtick: sun, sea and world-class scuba. Its obscure location gives it the exclusive feel of the Maldives; its lush, forested hillsides lend a Caribbean vibe. But unlike a private Maldivian atoll or a Caribbean resort complex, Havelock feels like — and is — a real place. It's wild and local. Actual people live here, not just employees of the hospitality trade. You might share your morning tuk-tuk with a skinny kid in his baggy school uniform. Come evening, in the main village — Village No 3 — I supped a sweet, milky chai in the fruit and veg market. In the Style Saloon barbershop, my cut-throat shave cost 40p, including the obligatory neck-crunching head massage. A bowl of biryani on the quayside was £1.20.

Havelock is India, but India lite. There are no beggars. People seem happy. They have land. Their kids go to school. They have their own Twenty20 cricket tournament. As part of the Partition resettlement deal, taxes are low. There's no duty on booze. This is India without the hassle, which might sound like cheating, but you could almost see the relief in the young backpackers' eyes as they stepped off the ferry after months-long grand tours of the world's most frenetic, bonkers country. They could finally chillax.

If you're concerned that life on Havelock still sounds a bit too rough and ready, wait till I tell you about the other hotel I stayed in. Jalakara opened on a jungle hillside last October, and if you know anyone with a honeymoon coming up, I'd tell them to book it now. (The Andamans are zika-free.) It's already attracted bigwigs from Hollywood and Bollywood. The film director Joe Wright was there for a new-year barbecue. I was the first journalist to stay.

Jalakara is owned by a big Brit with a beard, Mark Hill, who runs a gin company, Boxer Gin, and is a partner in a trendy Oxford restaurant, Turl Street Kitchen. Essentially, it's a private villa with six rooms and a very sexy cottage, where Hill stays two months of the year. Doubles start at £139 (jalakara.info).

It's a clever mix of modern, high-end design and traditional Indian materials: polished concrete, palm-leaf panels and clay roof tiles handmade by a single family in Karnataka. Each room is filled with highly nickable trinkets and art collected from around India by Hill and his wife, Atalanta Weller, a shoe designer. My room had a bathtub and mosquito-net-draped day bed in a private garden. Expect to see it in an expensive interiors mag soon.

It's not "luxury" by finger-clicking Indian city hotel standards — there's no room service, TV or wi-fi. Showers are open to the elements and you have to remember to put your loo paper in the bin provided. "Sheets with 600 thread count aren't that memorable," Hill says, and he has a point. The view from Jalakara's bar terrace, across the infinity pool to a glowing sun setting below the jungle canopy, will stick in the mind. As will the food, cooked by chef Chitrasan, from Darjeeling. Try his seafood momos and crispy chicken in garlic and honey sauce (mains from £8).

If the Andamans are so wonderful, though, why has it taken a 38-year-old Londoner with no hotel experience to open the first real luxury property? Why didn't one of the big chains get in here first? Part of the answer lies in the fact that the 38-year-old Londoner was only a 30-year-old when he started building Jalakara. In those eight years, Hill's Indian business partner was arrested (and released without charge). His cash deposit for the land was lost in a fire in the village. There was an earthquake. Hill reckons he's sunk £800,000 into his hotel, some of it the cash from the sale of his salad-bar business, "a lot" of it borrowed. "People have asked me, why would you do this, build your dream house in the middle of nowhere," he says. "I say, why wouldn't you?"

In paradise, though, there's always the fear that it won't last. Indeed, a luxury chain is on the way to Havelock: a Taj hotel is being built behind Beach No 7. However, it's been on the way for the past five years — the lack of mains electricity and the unreliable water supply are somewhat of an issue. Other modern advances are afoot: the road to No 7 is being widened (seemingly just by that one bloke with a shovel). There's talk of making Port Blair an international airport with connections to Bangkok. Amazon Prime now delivers.

Hill says visitors have been ringing the same alarm bell ever since he arrived, and it hasn't happened yet. Havelock's annoyingness to get to, its unsuitability for getting anything done in a hurry, could be its saviour. I reckon you've a while yet before the Andamans lose their particular magic.

Below, I've found you a package that gives you 75% more time on Havelock Island than I had. You're welcome. I'm jealous already.

Martin Hemming was a guest of Ampersand Travel, which has an eight-night trip to Havelock Island from £2,990pp, including four nights at Jalakara, three at Barefoot and one at the ITC Grand Chola, in Chennai. The price includes flights to Port Blair via Chennai, the ferry and private airport transfers (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com). Jalakara is closed from May to October

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