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Dindi, the river town in Andhra Pradesh, with its swaying palms, water lilies and authentic Andhra cuisine, is the new God's Own Country

THE only thing that is constant in life is change, but for some lucky folks who live in the palm-fringed coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, there is another bonus and a constant – River Godavari. Across the 77 km stretch from Rajahmundry to Dindi (pronounced Dhindi) my vacation destination this season, the meandering water body travelled with me all through. Tall and swaying coconut trees jostle for space next to stodgy and delicate banana plantations in a burst of green on the banks of the river. The reflection of the greenery in the river, which has now turned into a canal next to the

highway was a sight to behold. That my *Instagram* videos and photographs elicited responses such as 'Are you in Kerala?' or 'Is it God's Own Country?' proved that its beauty is no less a match to the South Indian state high on tourism. Even as the front office personnel was briefing me about my river view room, the breakfast and dinner timing, the magnificent central courtyard of the resort – a true showstopper – caught my attention. Filled with sparkling water, thanks to the sun rays playing hookey with it on that sunny April day and hundreds of white and pink water lilies floating in the water teleported me into a *Baahubali* World. It wasn't just a small pond for the guests to click pictures, but a gigantic 100x150 sq feet one that holds together the 50-room resort directly on the banks of the Godavari. Every room has a view of the river outside the window or of the pond, but I would say the pond view is better. Explains Resort Manager Tulasiram Gurram, "The Water Lilies, aka *Amazonica Victoria* botanically, have its roots in the Amazon forest. The lilies have seven feet-long stems with leaves that are eight-feet in circumference. If *Baahubali* director Rajamouli knew the leaf could hold a newborn



Making of Pootharekulu - Andhra Paper Sweet at Atreyapuram

fresh, cool river breeze. My day two begins with a special local breakfast called *Pottekkulu* (20 for four), an idli with a difference. The conical-shaped idlis are steamed in jackfruit leaves and these sell like hotcakes at Ganapati Coffee Hotel, a hole-in-the-wall place on the Dindi-Amalapuram road. Incidentally, this is one of the two places that sells this speciality and foodies come all the way from Rajahmundry to have this. Details: 97049-48378.



Jackfruit leaf idli, anyone?

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The colour-changing lilies

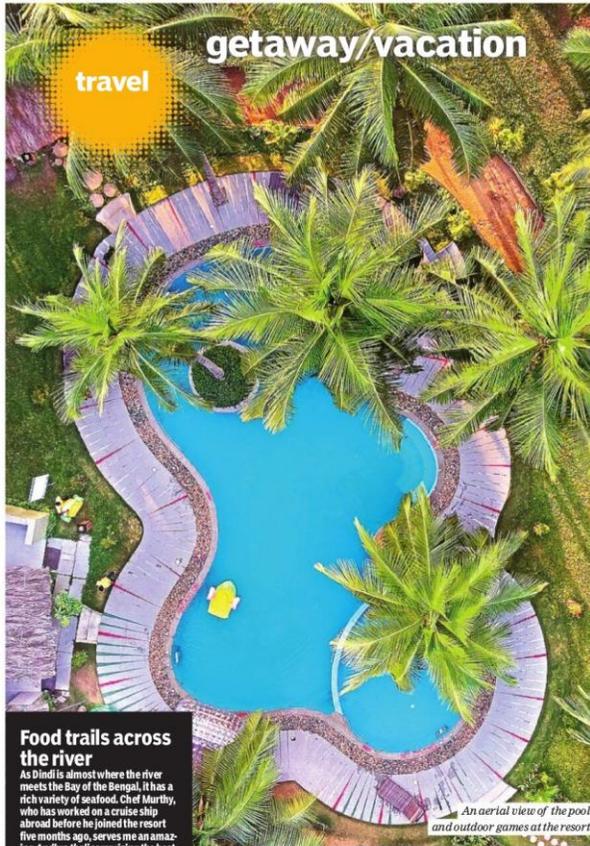
Around town

The resort is strategically located within a driving distance of most tourist attractions here. "We at Sterling Holidays believe in the 'Holiday Differently' concept. So we do customised itineraries for our guests. From temple trails to river adventures, we facilitate what they want," explains Peshwa Acharya, Chief Marketing Officer



Jackfruit biryani





travel

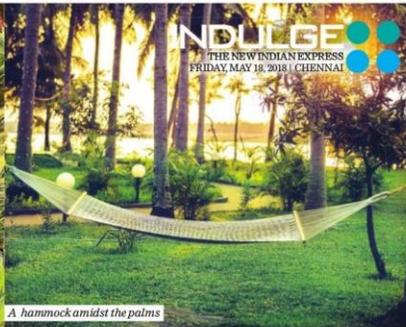
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Food trails across the river

As Dindi is almost where the river meets the Bay of the Bengal, it has a rich variety of seafood. Chef Murthy, who has worked on a cruise ship abroad before he joined the resort five months ago, serves me an amazing *Andhra thali* comprising the best of the local cuisine. On offer was jackfruit *bhajan* served in the core of the jackfruit skin. It was spicy and tangy and lived up to the praise the cuisine gets. Then, of course, was Sterling Dindi's signature dish Crab *Bharjaveethi* ghee rice, using local Godavari crabs. With the claws as the décor element, and loaded with red chilli, it was a meal to remember. Sterling's all-day diner *Veduka* serves a buffet breakfast and a la carte lunches and dinners. The *Andhra Thalifis* what guests love the most. Chef Murthy's best sellers are *Peethala puru* (crab curry) and *Silavali* River fish curry, both seafood specialities that go well with rice or as starters. *Details: 8872-26662.*



An aerial view of the pool and outdoor games at the resort



A hammock amidst the palms

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of the resort chain which owns 26 properties across India. He says that the district is an ideal destination across the year. "Summers are humid, but the days are longer. That means you can spend more time by the river bank. The monsoons mean better variety of seafood and Andhra is all about amazing food. The winters are lush with paddy fields and are a sight to behold. There are many festivals between September and February that are rich in the local culture. See, you can holiday here 365 days a year." *Details: 99086-33332 and sterlingholidays.com*

Lighting up lives

Don't miss the ascent to the lighthouse on the banks of the temple town of Antarvedi as you get to capture a panoramic view of the river embracing the sea. "Can you see the difference in the colours of the water? That's the Sangam point," explains Venkat, my guide and driver for the day. We got to see this amazing sight after a flight of 150 steps through a dingy staircase. The lighthouse closes at 5 pm. *Details: 98662-23812.*

On the way back

While going back to the airport, I get to stop at Sathyadev Nursery, one of the biggest nurseries in the world, near Kadiyapulanka. A 150-acre, 68-year-old nursery which houses over 10,000 varieties of

plants, they supply to the entire country. The soil is fertile here and literally every plant grows here like magic. Note that you cannot get any seeds here but only plants. So air travellers, watch out. *Details: 94401-78471.*

Sweetmeats and something special

The last stop was Atrayapuram, known for its world-famous Pootharekulu. The former is a light, fluffy layered sweet filled with organic jaggery powder and a hint of ghee. "No other place on Earth can make these thin rice flour paper sheets that are used to make this sweet," says Rajesh, who mans one of the 100 sweet shops that make and import them across the country and abroad. That they also have their own social media pages and accept orders on WhatsApp and have variations for diabetics shows they are in tune with the times. I got two boxes of them packed. But the fact that I forgot to collect it from the airline security check was truly sweet revenge. I have a reason to visit Dindi again. *Details: 91771-65463.*

The writer was invited by Sterling Holiday Resorts, Dindi
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Tailing the Godavari

The river at Rajahmundry is vastly different from the one you meet at Antarvedi. Here, the river is called Vasishtha Godavari, named after one of the Holy Saints of India and is much more turbulent, as though she is prepping herself to get into the embrace of the Bay of Bengal. However, you need to get into an 80-minute sunset river cruise to see its true splendour. I got lucky and got the entire cruise boat (₹4,500 for 90 minutes) for myself. Boatman Narasimha and I set on the mangrove hunt. For some reason, he insists on calling me 'saar' as he thinks all people dressed in trousers must be called so. As I hesitantly sit on the stern ledge, he eggs me on to go and stand near the bow and click my videos. Within 20 minutes of our cruise, the sun is already setting. The green mangroves, reminiscent of those at Sundarbans, stand majestically half submerged in water. For kilometres together, I can't spot a single soul. It was just the drone of the boat, the setting sun, and the mangroves with Narasimha for company. As the Hanuman flag on the boat does a boomerang in the air, fluttering away fast and furiously, I am tempted to go live on social media. But within minutes, as though the river and the sun conspired together, my battery just falls to a meager 7 per cent. I feel the Godavari cocking a snook at me and that I dare not capture her beauty with a mere Samsung phone and show off to the world. And that one needs to take the effort to come all the way to Dindi to see her in her best form. Someday again, dear river. After a quick *darshan* of the centuries-old Narasimha Swamy temple on the river bank, it's a wrap. *Details: 99494-11191.*

