

A home away from home – home stays in Konkan!

Imagine you safely climbing on a coconut tree-top and plucking coconuts! Or you preparing local delicacies and serving your family members! Learn traditional fishing methods and relish the fishes you got! Go on a boat ride by safely rowing it! You can actually experience all these off-beat activities by opting for some off-beat destinations.

Velas, a small village in the Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra has popped up on the tourist map because of its Marine Turtle Festival. This village is an apt representative of nature conservation through community participation. Turtle Festival is an opportunity for metro based nature lovers to see the never-seen-before phenomenon of turtle hatchling going in the sea. GEF-UNDP must be credited for introducing and stabilizing this model of eco-tourism through Sahyadri's Marine Turtle Conservation program. In 2006, GEF UNDP's Mr. Sodhi and his team proposed the villagers to host the tourists in their own houses, offer them variety of local delicacies, walk them through their farms and in-general befriend them. Initially, the villagers were reluctant to host the tourists in their own houses. But an overwhelming response by tourists was appreciated and they were ready for a totally new experience for the tourists. During turtle festival season home-stay owners yield an additional 10-12% of their annual income.

All of this is possible because of marine turtle conservation program developed by Sahyadri along the entire coast of Maharashtra. Female marine turtles travel thousands of kilometers and come back to their birth place to nest during November to March. Every nest is about 1-1.5 feet deep in sand having about 100-120 eggs. It takes about 50-55 days for hatchlings to emerge. As hatchlings emerge they naturally start crawling towards the sea.

Sahyadri's efforts helped to stop poaching of marine turtle eggs along the entire Maharashtra coast and ensured safe release of hatchlings. Marine turtle festival is an opportunity for tourists to witness the natural phenomenon of hatchlings crawling towards sea. With GEF-UNDP's assistance, Sahyadri set eco-tourism model at Velas and empowered locals to start home stay. It also gives Women's Self Help Groups an opportunity to earn by selling local products.

The villagers don't have to make an additional investment for tourists. A stay in operational houses gives tourists a sense of security. Cleanliness, open and lively environment, and prompt service by villagers makes them feel very comfortable. Other small shops, mini-restaurants in a house courtyard give a homely feeling. Since, people are not provided in separate rooms, they blend in the village atmosphere instantly. People can chit-chat by sitting over swings and exchange ideas with each other. Moreover, a common rate is decided by all the home stay owners. This generates a sense of unity in the village. It also builds trust for the villagers amongst the tourists. A special bond is created amongst the tourists and the villagers through cricket matches, other competitions with villagers, nature trails and featuring of documentaries. This attachment with the villagers helps tourists to solve the problems in the village. This also brings in the technological exchanges in the village through tourists. Tourists have also participated enthusiastically in the construction of village roads. 10% of the total amount from the tourists is effectively utilized for conservation activities. All this has been possible just because of the introduction of the home-stay model as a part of conservation program.

SNM prepared guidelines regarding cleanliness, preparation and serving of food in hygienic conditions and security of the tourists. SNM also trained the locals for hospitality, development of tourist guides and nature trails, basic accounting, housekeeping etc. SNM also provides with a booklet on local biodiversity and tourism management to all individuals involved in providing home-stay. The tourists are furnished with all information about visiting attractions, accommodation facilities and contact details of service providers on SNM's website for easy communication between the villagers and tourists. Recognition of home-stays by Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation is considered as an extra-ordinary achievement.

Veer is another off-beat home-stay destination in Ratnagiri. The picturesque view of nature, the totally awesome waterfall collapsing from a tall mountain, areca nut plantations, a pristine estuary nearby, variety of plants, singing birds and butterflies flaunting their beautiful colours are the USP of this venue.

SNM intends to introduce and replicate this home-stay model at other places like Nanemachi, Shrivardhan where exist vulture colonies and other such places along the entire coast of Maharashtra. Many individuals, self-help groups, local organizations are now actively involved in these home-stays which proves the effectiveness of this model.