

COVERT AFFAIRS



(Top) Diners savour Delhi-based DSSC's secret dining experiences; and (below) participants at Pindrop Mystery camps in and around Bengaluru

Carefully curated mystery experiences that celebrate unpredictability promise a world of adventurous episodes, finds **Nikita Puri**



Some time ago on a Saturday, Bengaluru-based real estate consultant Akshay Rajgopalan sat with his backpack with essentials like a change of clothes, a light jacket and extra towels for his two Labradors, Fonzie and Leia. They were set to go camping. Only, they didn't know where.

"It could have been near a forest, some water body or even a mountain," recalls Rajgopalan. All

he knew for certain was that the "mystery" camps, organised by Bengaluru-based startup, Camp Monk, were designed to be just about two hours from the city. The charm of not knowing what to expect beforehand was one of the reasons Rajgopalan had signed up for the experience.

Soon enough, the GPS coordinates of the secret campsite were shared, and Rajgopalan was on his way to a site where he'd set up camp on a farmland atop a hill. Another "mystery" camp was on a 60-acre mango orchard.

Camp Monk calls these outings "Pindrop: Mystery Camping"

experiences, and since their inception about eight months ago, they've had a number of groups opting for mysteries. Their 10th one is scheduled for this weekend. All one knows for sure is that there will be campfire, barbecue, tents and conventional washrooms. The last one is especially important since Camp Monk aims to "standardise" camping experiences, says the startup's co-founder, Amit Shetty. The one thing that bothers most city folks is the absence of facilities like clean drinking water and food. Camp Monk ensures that the hosts who sign up with them to offer their lands for private camping have these utilities in place.

From a nature camp run by a conservationist in Hunsur (near Mysuru in Karnataka), a campsite in Wayanad (Kerala), where the infinity pool overlooks a dense forest, to a rustic mountaintop place in Kodaikanal (Tamil Nadu) and India's first caravan park in Mysuru, a growing list of tie-ups is a growth. While the signature mystery camps are currently only around Bengaluru, some places near Mumbai and Pune have also been added to the list.

The enigma of "what, when, where" has made for some exciting ventures. Delhi, for instance, is home to entrepreneur Shreya Soni's DSSC, the erstwhile Delhi Secret Supper Club. Patrons of this club are told where to come only 12 hours before the event. Besides supper, one can sign up for DSSC's equally-secret gathering of tipplers.

In Mumbai, the chance to be a part of such an event comes through former investment banker Kanu Gupta's Secret Supper Project. Gupta is also the powerhouse behind Savour Experiences, which runs a specialised lunch-subscription service in Mumbai, the Secret Supper Project as well as an events company. Over 200 people attend seven years since they started, Savor's process of choosing diners for the Secret Supper remains an engaging one. If you haven't attended one of

these before, that's a point in your favour. But it's usually answers to the "question of the month" which they send out that are your way in.

"The questions are linked to the evening thematically," says Gupta. One such question asked potential diners to talk about a painter they loved. During the dinner that followed, a painter had plated seafood platters.

"Frankly, my wife Tanya and I had no idea on what to expect," advertising veteran Sandeep Goyal says about one of Savor's events. "It turned out to be a whopper of an evening. You know you are in for an exceptional experience, but that experience is kind of in suspended animation till it actually happens," adds Goyal, the chairman of Mogae Media. He was part of an evening where they had a nine-course dessert menu paired with Sake and wine.

Besides eclectic menus, it's also the venue that counts. DSSC's Soni has had gatherings tucked away on restaurant rooftops. Gupta once had a dinner organised at a 150-year-old home that now doubles as a tailor's shop.

In Delhi, entry to secret suppers can often entail four-digit numerical codes to cheeky passwords. The gambit adds to the speakeasy air of the secret affair.

It's the mystery of the whole experience, from venue to menu and the people you're likely to meet, that continues to keep the wheels in these enterprises moving. In fact, DSSC was so secretive that Soni ran the club anonymously for four years.

Be it a night under the stars or a culinary experience worth its salt, the labyrinth of "mystery" experiences lies just under the surface of social media check-ins. These experiences, swear their backers, aren't for visibility on Instagram or Facebook. "This isn't about exclusivity at all," says Gupta. Instead, it's about meeting new people, embracing surprises and spending time well.

To join in, write to reservations@secretssupperproject.com for Mumbai's Secret Supper Project and follow DSSC and Camp Monk on social media

It's the mystery of the experience, from venue to menu and the people you meet, that continues to keep the wheels in these enterprises moving

