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CAMILLA LONG
LOSES HER MIND IN RIO

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OCTOBER 2013 £3.99

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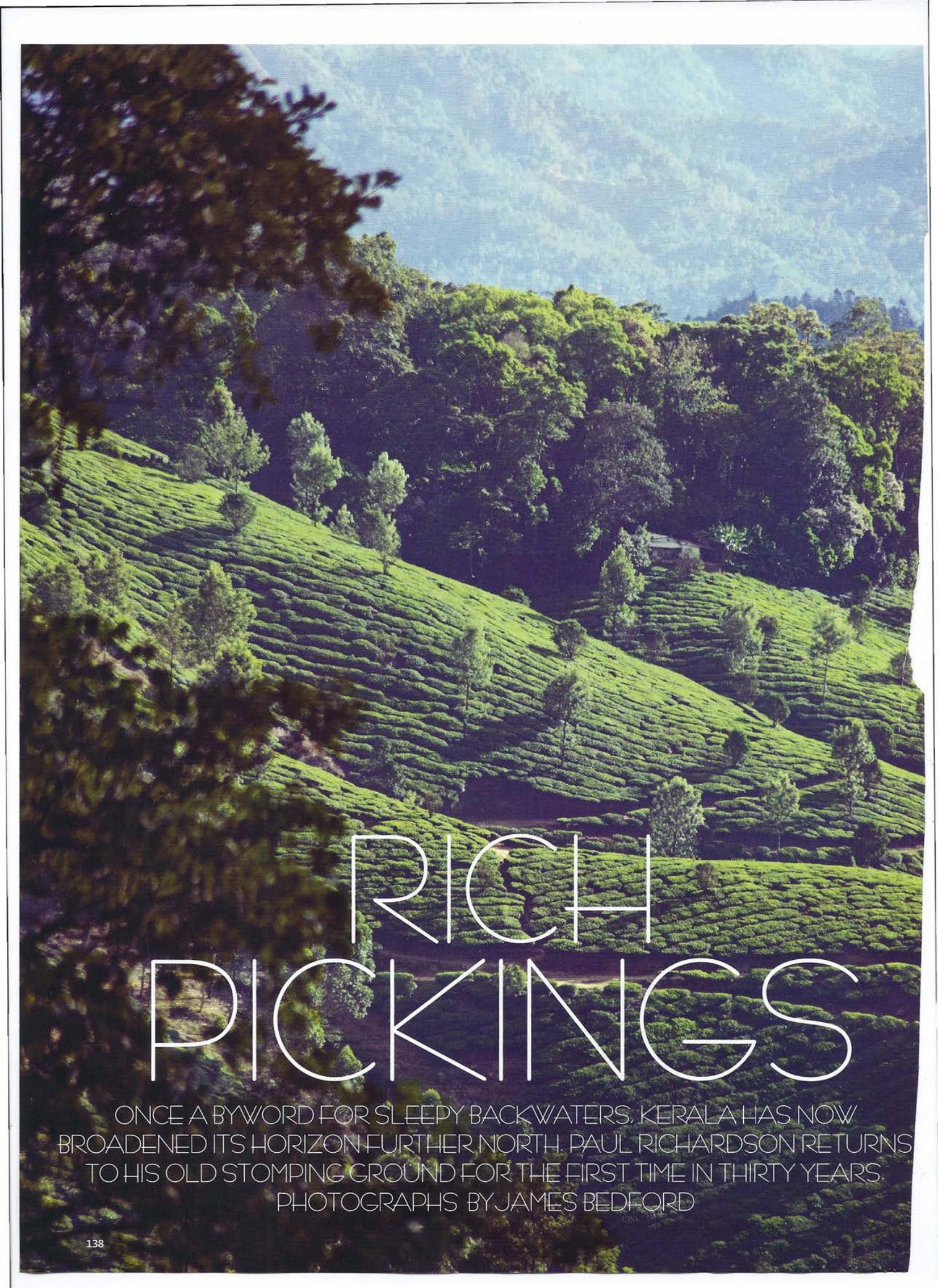


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RICH PICKINGS

ONCE A BYWORD FOR SLEEPY BACKWATERS, KERALA HAS NOW
BROADENED ITS HORIZON FURTHER NORTH. PAUL RICHARDSON RETURNS
TO HIS OLD STOMPING GROUND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THIRTY YEARS.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES BEDFORD



wallowed up to their necks. Communist flags fluttered on the lanes that wove among the coconut woods. As we drove through Kottayam, the bearded face of Karl Marx loomed up on a wall.

Kerala is a paradox of sorts, a version of India that is both typical and oddly uncharacteristic. Famously left-leaning, the state takes a justifiable pride in its near-universal literacy rates and commitment to social justice. Yet in no sense is Kerala India-lite. It has as much exoticism and energy as anywhere else in the country, and few regions have deeper roots. Kerala is the cradle of Ayurveda, the noble Hindu philosophy of wellbeing, and of antique theatre traditions such as Kathakali and Theyyam. As Patrick French writes in his illuminating *India: A Portrait*, 'the noise of central and northern India can at times drown out the subtlety of the south'.

For three hours we had been winding our way upwards into the highlands of Kerala's interior. Up at Munnar, a former colonial hill station, the climate was woolly-jumper cool. The hillsides were clad in the vibrant green of tea plantations, each tree its own flat-topped tussock, with gangs of tea pickers (quaintly known as 'pluckers') moving among them like gardeners in a maze of privet hedges. Some of these trees had

been planted in the 1880s, when the British brought tea seeds from China. Above the tea was spice and forest.

My room at the Windermere Estate looked like a snapshot of an idealised 1940s England, somehow comfy and spartan at the same time, with flickering lights and framed, embroidered portraits of dogs. At 7pm prompt the manager appeared carrying a G&T on a silver tray, with a slice of lime floating on the cool, strong liquid (no ice, both for safety and authenticity).

I hadn't anticipated the chill of this mountain landscape, nor had I expected to feel nostalgia here. But at the town's tea museum I was surprisingly moved by the Raj-era portraits of slick-haired, mustachioed planters, and by a poster for the Munnar Flower Show on 18 May 1901 offering 'tiffin and gymkhana'. The manicured lawns and creaky interiors of the High Range Club were straight out of *The Far Pavilions*, and Munnar's chapel was essentially an English parish church complete with the original pews, Victorian stained-glass windows and hymn numbers on a board.

A day later, down we plunged again into the tropical zone: fields of rice and yam, papaya and pineapple. I was quickly realising

