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ultratravel

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YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

INDIA RISING

*How Kerala, Calcutta
and Rajasthan are
reinventing themselves*

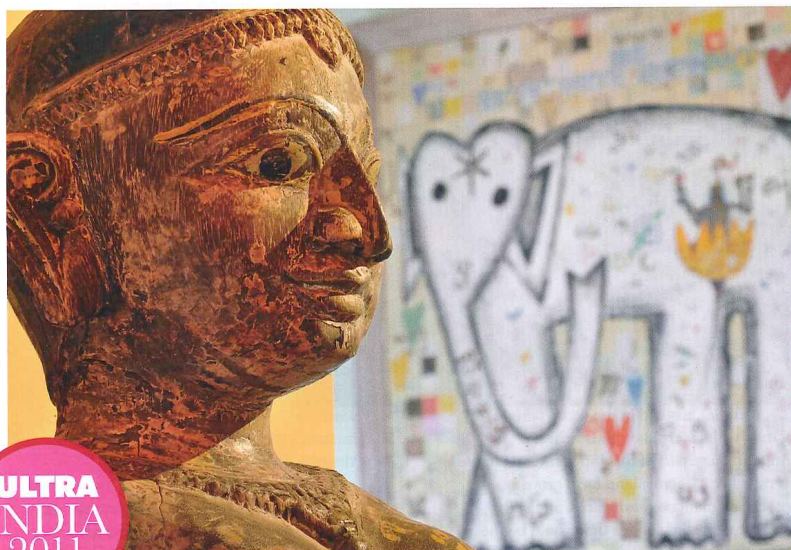
PLUS
MOUNTAIN HIGHS &
ADRENALIN KICKS
CAJUN COUNTRY
THE WORLD'S
BEST MARTINI BARS

WIN A LUXURY HOLIDAY FOR TWO IN DUBAI



Kerala *Afloat in the Backwaters*

Johnny Morris enjoys the quiet life on the southern coast, relishing vibrant spices, seafood and saris as he sails



Where cultures blend (clockwise, from top left) Prawn and mango salad at Malabar House; aboard a private houseboat on Lake Vembanad; Holy Cross Church in Kochi; and art at Serenity Hotel

It is a steamy night in the tongue-twisting town of Thiruvananthapuram (formerly simply Trivandrum) and just ahead of me in the crowd I can see the distinguished writer and historian William Dalrymple dancing like a delirious teenager. In his distinctive rich tones, he booms out a request for the band on stage to play the punk hit "Rat Trap". Most of the small audience of Malayalees aren't familiar with the song, or indeed any of the back catalogue of tonight's star performer, Sir Bob Geldof. They just want more of his bassey rock 'n' roll. As the gig roars on in the balmy heat, there is a surprise: Sting, who joins his Band Aid buddy on stage for a catchy rendition of "Hole to Fill". The crowd laps up the duet; if the modest amphitheatre in the Kanakakunnu Palace public park had a roof to raise, it would be spinning into the stratosphere.

It's a suitably starry end to the first ever

Hay literary and arts festival staged in India and a memorable way for me to conclude my first visit to the southern state of Kerala. After a weekend of passionate debate and talks by such writers as Sebastian Faulks, Rosie Boycott, Simon Schama and Vikram Seth, I am a convert to the idea of combining an exotic holiday with a literature festival: poolside one day, brain gymnasium the next.

An hour after the Geldof concert I find myself at a beach party, 10 miles south, in the coconut-curtained town of Kovalam. A smiling waiter offers me a choice of crab or prawn curry and I sit back to listen to the pleasing combo of traditional Keralan music and the sounds of the Arabian Sea. The moon illuminates the huge waves and Kerala's claim to be "God's own country" seems a pretty fair one. I am relieved; earlier in my trip through the communist-governed state of Kerala, I had begun to think its tourism slogan was either pure chutzpah or misplaced irony.

Ten days earlier in Kochi, the biggest boat I have ever seen in my life slides past the manicured gardens of the Vivanta by Taj Malabar hotel at the tip of Willingdon Island, a tiny tugboat guiding it towards the new Vallarpadam container terminal. The terminal has long been needed. Financed with Dubai dirhams in the heart of Kochi's outlet to the Arabian Sea, it means the world's most populous democracy will no longer have to receive its container ships via neighbouring Sri Lanka. Emblazoned on the boat's hull in 70ft-high white letters is the word "INDIA": an announcement to even the most short-sighted of observers that Kochi is back in business as a key trading centre.

"Perhaps the Indian economy can save the world after all," I suggest later, over Indian whiskey in the hotel's reassuringly old-fashioned bar, to businessman Naveen Ravi. He recognises my eyes are still wide from the sight of the gigantic container

ship. “Yes, perhaps we can, but watching history unfold right in front of you can be daunting. If you prefer it at arm’s length, you should take the ferry to the heritage centre of Fort Kochi.”

The next day I follow his advice, but sadly the 16th-century stronghold of Fort Kochi isn’t quite the magical mix of colonial architecture and benign village-green atmosphere that Ravi, and most of the guidebooks, have promised. The original Portuguese walls of the fort were damaged as early as 1683 by the Dutch and then finished off by their British successors.

So, unlike the impressive Galle Fort in nearby Sri Lanka, there isn’t a sense of architectural unity. But there are plenty of sights to take in: the ingeniously lazy Chinese fishing nets (plonk in net, wait, then lift out fish) and the historical buildings such as the pretty Jewish synagogue; the oldest European Christian church in India, housing the grave of Vasco da Gama; a Jain temple; and the Mattancherry Palace. All are interesting places – if you don’t mind joining coachloads of domestic tourists and queues, dodging stray dogs and fending off persistent Kashmiri trinket salesmen. Admittedly, the anarchic traffic chaos is slightly less troublesome in Fort Kochi than is the India norm, but the litter-strewn local beach is far from desirable.

Not everything I encounter in Kochi is disappointing. The stylish Malabar House hotel and its sister loft space, Trinity, feel as if they have been beamed down from a friendly designer planet, and The Brunton Boatyard Hotel and its new David Hall gallery offer elegant colonial comforts. But for a visitor in search of “heavenly” Kerala, there isn’t much to keep you. Better to do as I did and leave the booming docks of Kochi and the internet cafés of the Fort and head to the genuine gem of the Backwaters.

Sugar or salt lime soda, sir?” asks Binoy, the friendly skipper of my new floating home, Spice Coast Number 4. I am sitting in one of those wonderfully comfortable Indian teak chairs with armrests as long as helicopter blades, watching stray water hyacinths and lavenders float by. We are in the middle of Lake Vembanad, India’s longest lake, at the heart of the 560-mile network of green creeks and wetlands that make up Kerala’s Backwaters.

Freshly-made shrimp and coconut curry is announcing itself in warm wafts from the boat’s galley kitchen. “What is your spice level, sir?” continues the captain. Life is pretty good if you are a passenger on my houseboat (locally known as a *kettuvallam*). There are two other crew members, Sadasivan and Shadji, to look after me, and a mini pirates’ wheel on the front deck to help Binoy steer us from one idyllic spot to the next.

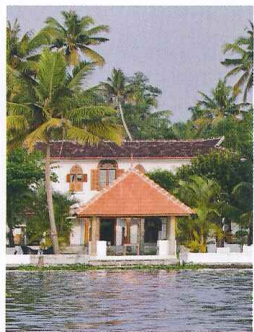
The 70ft boat has been artfully converted to carry visitors rather than its traditional cargo of rice. It has a jackwood hull and a coconut-thatch roof held together with sisal that make it look, from a distance, like a giant knitted armadillo. I have a cosy cabin, with a whirling fan, to retire to; binoculars with which to monitor the rich birdlife; and, best of all, a detailed map of the Backwaters to study. The chart has symbols for toddy shops, temples, churches, mosques and synagogues, with a key that helps tell the unique story of this watery corner of the world.

Unlike the roads that surround it, the lake has its own well-ordered rhythm. Motorboats and *kettuvallams* have to moor by 5pm to allow the fishermen to set their nets in the brackish water. Peace prevails as the sun sets over the bottle-green surface of the lake and the only sounds I can hear are cries of terns and cormorants. Bliss, until new noises of ritual teeth-cleaning and then heavy snoring start up from the crew’s adjacent cabin. Lying awake

under my mosquito net, I make a note that perhaps honeymooners should opt for a bigger boat or, better still, take day trips on the lake and spend their nights in one of the lakeside hotels.

The newest and best hotel on offer is a small property called Purity: an Italianate villa with designer-tropical grounds that ease down to a beach overlooking the widest stretch of Lake Vembanad (see details, right). The interiors are a masterclass in elegant eclecticism, with Malabar’s trademark vibrant colours played off against the occasional chandelier and a striking collection of contemporary and traditional Indian art.

As I step back aboard my houseboat from the hotel’s jetty, I regret that I have had the chance only to visit and not to linger. Such boutique jewels as Purity are thin on the ground in Kerala and, like quiet bedrooms, they should be cherished.



The lake has its own rhythm, and the only sounds are the cries of terns and cormorants

A few days later, I am back on dry land, weaving through honking traffic on the back of the motorbike belonging to my new friend, Narvoze. As we head along the Thanneermukkom bridge to Vechur on the eastern side of the lake, he explains the problems of the boom in local “homestays”: Kerala’s version of b&bs. “Great hardware, terrible software,” he shouts. “All that Gulf money has paid for new properties, but the owners are never there to run them properly.”

Thankfully, I am heading to a homestay that completely disproves his theory. Philipkutty’s Farm has both charming hardware in the form of five pretty canalside bungalows and very hospitable software in the guise of its owners, Anu Mathew and her mother-in-law, Aniamma Philip.

One of the things you notice as you travel around Kerala is the confidence and independence of its local women. It is refreshing to see young women driving their own scooters, their bright saris rippling in the wind, and a relief to see middle-aged women on election posters (normally Communist Party of India), instead of the usual parade of stern-looking men with caterpillar moustaches.

Anu and Aniamma are part of this independent female tradition. Anu runs her 35-acre island farm growing coconut palms, cacao, mangoes and spices, and still manages to provide a level of service that would be the envy of most five-star resorts.

Aniamma is in charge of cooking and has the magic talent of combining flavours that make the taste buds dance. She specialises in Syrian Christian cuisine and delivers her heavenly food on a large lazy susan in the farm’s garden pavilion: meen molee (fish curry – here, kingfish – cooked in coconut milk), paddy-field prawns spiced with ginger and masala paste, pretty rice pancake *dhosas*, and a divine pudding of cinnamon rice, coconut milk and jaggery steamed in a banana leaf.

It is my last day at the farm and the sky is the colour of gunpowder as I watch Aniamma, Anu and her pretty daughter Anya being ferried over the canal in their small country canoe. They are on their way to six o’clock mass at the local Catholic church and have dressed up in their best saris and shoes. Turquoise, cerise and orange, they stand out like Christmas decorations against the dark green of the tropical forest.

A few *kettuvallams* drift by, the sun goes down and the haunting sound of a 19th-century European hymn drifts across the water. I pack my things and put Anu’s gift of home-grown cinnamon, mace, nutmeg and pepper at the top of my bag. Tomorrow I have a train to catch, the literature festival to attend and a few of Sir Bob Geldof’s 20th-century European hymns to enjoy.

KERALA BASICS

WHEN TO GO

Between December and March, when the temperature averages 30C and rainfall is minimal. May to September is monsoon season, which is followed by sporadic heavy rains from October to late November.

WHERE TO STAY

Purity at Lake Vembanad

European-style villa (formerly called Casa del Fauno) overlooking Lake Vembanad, with attractive grounds and six rooms, ranging from a family cottage to a suite that runs the length of the villa (from £195 double).

Malabar Escapes (00 91 484 221 6666, malabarescapes.com), whose other properties include Malabar House and Trinity in Fort Kochi, offers a five-night Escape Experience package, staying at two of its hotels and its houseboat, from £1,100 for two, half-board, with a day’s excursion on an elephant or bullock cart.

The Brunton Boatyard and Spice Coast Cruisers

A historic hotel resurrected from a Victorian shipyard with 22 bedrooms overlooking the water, furnished with local wooden pieces and artefacts. Its restaurant specialises in historic cuisines ranging from Syrian Christian, Jewish and Dutch to British colonial dishes and local Kerala specialties. Brunton’s is the flagship property of eco-friendly CGH Earth (00 91 484 301 1711, cgheart.com), which also owns such authentic rice boats as Spice Coast. Prices at The Brunton Boatyard Hotel start at £250 double; cruises from £224 full-board.

Vivanta by Taj, Kovalam and Malabar

The Kovalam resort hotel (00 91 471 661 3000, vivanta.bytaj.com), with its airy beach restaurant, tropical golf course and palm-fringed infinity pool, is both relaxed and luxurious. Its 59 hillside cottages make a good base from which to travel to the Hay Festival and to explore the coast; doubles from £168. By contrast, the Malabar (00 91 484 664 3000, vivantabytaj.com) in Kochi is reassuringly old-fashioned and its Rice Boat one of the city’s best restaurants for seafood; doubles from £93.

Philipkutty’s Farm

A gem of a homestay, with tranquil gardens for birdwatching, five-star hospitality and delicious home-cooked Kerala food. On a 45-acre reclaimed island on the eastern shores of Lake Vembanad, and accessible only by boat, Philipkutty’s (00 91 482 927 6529, philipkuttyfarm.com) has five oriental-style waterside villas radiating from what is still a working farmstead. Prices from £150 for two, full-board.

The Park on Vembanad Lake

A new boutique resort, The Park (00 91 478 258 4430, theparkhotels.com) has 10 contemporary thatched villas, a sleek designer pool and a tented spa, and is right on the waterfront overlooking a Riviera-style Apsara houseboat which can accommodate 16 guests. The Park from £95 double; Apsara from £457, full-board.

WHAT TO DO

The Backwaters are a perfect place to catch up on reading; particularly recommended are *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, set locally in Ayemenem, and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple, with its vivid descriptions of local kathakali dancers. Continuing the literary theme, the Hay Festival

(hayfestival.com/kerala) is set to become a regular event after November 2010’s success.

HOW TO DO IT

Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, ampersandtravel.com) offers a 17-day Kerala Adventure itinerary from £2,983. The price includes return flights, b&b, transfers and private guides. Bespoke tours taking in Kovalam and the Hay Festival can be arranged on request.

