

# KERALA

## Exploring the Garden State of India

Story and photographs by Robert Watson

***As the palm-fringed shores of the Kerala backwaters quietly slide by, there is time to reflect on this idyllic place in the sun - Kerala, land of the coconut.***

An Indophile friend once remarked that Kerala is the essence of the India in your old school geography books. Set in a garden of natural beauty and abundance, this South Indian State is indeed a melting pot of some of the best features of Indian culture, traditions, architecture, as well as the natural environment. There is also plenty of individual character that you will find nowhere else in India.

Kerala is a land of wonderful contrasts. The majority of people have relatively simple rural lifestyles yet Malayalis - the people of Kerala - are the most literate people in India. Although Hindus are the majority, there are significant minorities of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and even the remnants of a once large Jewish population. Temples, mosques and churches are numerous, and Kerala also boasts one of the oldest synagogues in the world.

Kerala is tolerant and relatively free of communal violence yet the presiding Hindu deity is the warrior goddess Bhadrakali. There are golden beaches with glistening seawater on the coast, where the temperature seldom goes below 20 C, as well as the jungle and tea plantations of the cool highland areas. Many of the main cities have two names, the newer Malayam names as well as the older and frequently used Anglicised names.

This journey starts in Cochin, one of India's most beautiful and busiest harbour cities. First impressions approaching Cochin by air is of a tropical paradise with immense waterways, palm-studded islands and peninsulas on which the city is built. Across the water on the mainland is the newer and busier city of Ernakulum. On Cochin's main

harbour are the islands of Wilmington, Vypeen, Vallarpadam, Bolghatty and Gundu, as well as the main area of interest for travellers, the Fort Cochin, Mattancherry peninsula. The harbour is a kaleidoscope of colour and activity with cargo boats, passenger ferries and fishing craft, ranging from one-man canoes to ocean going trawlers.

Although the character is undeniably Kerala, Cochin exhibits many influences from the various foreign traders who have lived here over the centuries. Fort Cochin is the site of the ancient and efficient Chinese fishing nets, which were introduced by the court traders of Kublai Khan. Huge cantilevered nets on a system of pulleys, ropes and weights are lowered into the water at high tide, then pulled out after a few minutes trapping the fish within. This operation continues on through the night with oil lights dangling on the nets to attract the fish. St. Francis Church at Fort Cochin, established in 1503 by the Portuguese Franciscan friars, was the burial place of Vasco da Gama in 1524. Although the remains of this famous Cochin resident were later returned to Portugal, the tombstone is still in the church. Rebuilt and renovated by the Dutch then the British, the church is still used for Sunday services, during which punkawallas manually pull ropes on the big, woven rattan fans to provide air conditioning. It is far easier to get around Cochin by water than by road. Plying the harbour is a variety of public and privately operated tour boats from which you can see many of Cochin's famous sights. The charming Bolghatty Palace Hotel, formerly a palace built by the Dutch is well worth a visit, as is the

modern and luxurious Taj Malabar Hotel on the tip of Willingdon Island. Across the water in nearby Mattancherry is Jewtown, site of one of the oldest synagogues in the world. Handicraft and antique shops can be found nearby as well as the spice markets that helped make Cochin one of the best known Indian cities in the world.

The evening in Cochin is the time to see the magnificent Kerala dance-drama theatre of Kathakali. Kathakali dancers are trained in their rigid discipline from the age of about 9 for eight years. The intricate make-up of the dancers takes hours to prepare and apply, then, dressed in spectacular costumes, the dancers perform theatre with origins in yoga, mythology and spiritual beliefs.



*Kathakali Dancer, Ernakulum, Kerala*

To get relief from the coastal humidity and see magnificent scenery, a day trip by car to the Kerala High Ranges is an easy option from Cochin. Once through the bustling city of Ernakulum, the scenery changes from a rich patchwork of cultivated fields of rice,

banana, cardamom and rubber plantations, to thick tropical forests with waterfalls cascading over cliffs beside the road as you start to climb the Kerala High Ranges. At the top of the range at an elevation of 1500 metres is Munnar, a hill station at the centre of one of India's largest tea growing areas. The cool air is permeated with the scent of tea, and tea bushes stretch along the hilltops like a giant sculptured carpet as far as you can see. Vivid splashes of colour interspersed among the tea bushes reveal the presence of plantation workers picking the tender young tea leaves.



*Tea Pickers at Munnar, Kerala*

One of the most exotic, yet simple pleasures of India is a trip through the Kerala backwaters. The backwaters is a series of palm-fringed lagoons, rivers and canals inland from the Malabar Coast, linking Cochin with the port of Quilon in south Kerala. It is an area of great beauty and enchantment and a trip not to be missed by any south Indian traveller. From the moment the kettuvallom or rice barge - the traditional backwaters cargo boat - casts off from the bank at Allepey, you become part of this idyllic, relaxed world. The panorama is captivating and serene, the pace of life is relaxed, the people friendly, the climate is warm and sultry, and there is a plentiful supply of fresh, delicious food.

In the Kerala backwaters there is never a time when there is not something of beauty and interest to observe as the kettuvallom floats along the mirror surface of the water. Some canals are so narrow you can almost touch each side from the boat. Backwaters life is going on literally within reach as you

the altruistic and energetic Babu Varghese. A few years ago Babu, realising the tourist potential of the backwaters, acquired his first kettuvallom. He operates a boat yard at Quilon where craftsmen restore and renovate the old kettuvalloms using traditional techniques. Coconut palm leaves are



*A traditional kettuvallom (rice barge) converted to a houseboat on the Kerala Backwaters*

glide by, occasionally alighting at a village to buy fresh food or to discover one of the many crafts of the area. Men are loading boats with cargoes of cashews, coconuts and rice; women are spinning coconut fibre into lengths of sisal rope or tending water buffalo; children wend their way along a maze of small peninsulas, spits and tracks on their way to school. Out on the lakes, young men dive to the bottom for black mud to pack around coconut trees to help insulate the root system from the coming summer heat. Fishermen cast nets by hand from small canoes. In the evening the houseboat moors on a lake and another seemingly effortless and delectable meal is served and enjoyed while the sun sets over the palm-silhouetted horizon, streaking the sky with brilliant hues of red, pink and yellow.

TourIndia, a company specialising in south Indian travel, operates this unique backwaters holiday enterprise under the direction of

woven into watertight canopies and awnings and the master boatbuilder oversees repairs and restoration of the hulls. Timber from fruit trees is hewn into planks to form the hull which is clamped together using coconut fibre wadding saturated in fish oil between the planks and coir rope to bind the planks together. No nails or screws are used in the construction.

Houseboat accommodation comprises two double bedrooms, with attached bathrooms, and a spacious central area in which to relax and dine. The hedonist can lie in bed with the rattan awning raised and watch the scenery slowly glide past, or sit on cane armchairs on small decks built out over the water on either side of the boat. The crew of four including captain, deck hand, cook and guide add yet another dimension to this marvelous adventure with their abundant local knowledge and efficient, friendly service.

The cuisine is, like everything else on TourIndia's houseboats, authentically Keralan and served on fresh palm leaves. A typical meal comprises a number of Keralan vegetable dishes such as thoran, which is a mixed cabbage and coconut dish; avial, a popular curry of mixed potato and green banana; pavakay, a tasty, bitter Keralan vegetable; and fish molly, a hot and spicy fish curry with potato, coconut milk and spices.

A backwaters houseboat journey can last from two days to two weeks, and finishes at Quilon with a tour of TourIndia's boatyard with the remarkable Babu Varghese proudly showing off the time honoured boat building techniques of the Kerala waterways.

centre of this 770 square kilometre park surrounded by lush tropical forest and grassy slopes. Periyar boasted the largest wild elephant population of any of India's wildlife reserves a few years ago, however, ivory poaching has all but wiped out the male tusker elephant population and hence disrupted the breeding cycle. Other than elephant, or for the lucky ones, a tiger sighting, Periyar is renowned for its birdlife and diverse vegetation and well worth at least a couple of days.

A few kilometres south of Trivandrum is the popular beach town of Kovalum. In recent years, well-planned development has provided a variety of accommodation as more



*Kovalam's main beach - lined with cafes and restaurants*

Trivandrum or Thiruvananthapuram as it is called in Kerala - is one and a half-hour drive from Quilon and this city has the ambiance of a large country town rather than an Indian State capital. Political and religious expression is free and profuse in Trivandrum and it is common to see colourful religious festival parades as well as noisy, but peaceful union and political rallies. Kerala has the distinction of being the first place in the world to freely elect a communist government in 1957. Successive governments have implemented policies for fairer distribution of land, income, health services and education as well as encouraging tourism and development.

Trivandrum is a good spot to make on-going travel arrangements, as there are good road, rail and air connections to other parts of India as well as the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Tours to the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary at Thekkady near the Tamil Nadu border can be made from Trivandrum. The main feature of Periyar is the huge artificial lake in the

travellers include Kovalum on south Indian travel itineraries. November to March is the best time to visit Kovalum to take advantage of the beautiful beaches with clean seawater and good surf, and the excellent cuisine served from a plethora of beach side cafes and restaurants. Unlike the better known beach resort of Goa to the north, Kovalum is, as yet, relatively undiscovered with a laid back atmosphere and coastal panorama second to none.



*Local villagers examine the morning catch near Kovalam*

There are several good beaches in a succession of small palm-fringed bays stretching along the coast. In the early mornings the local villages come to life when the day's fishing starts. Large open boats set fishing nets in large arcs across the bays. The ropes on the end of the nets are rowed

back to the beach where men women and children of all ages start pulling the nets in to the beach. Some of the nets are set well over a kilometre to sea, and on larger beaches there may be three or four nets being set and pulled in at one time. Young boys swim out to scare escaping fish back into the nets, villagers shout encouragement from the cliffs, and the rare early morning tourist is gently coerced into a turn pulling in the nets. The best place to watch the fishing activity is the ocean beach adjacent to the coastal fishing village that is a scenic two kilometre walk south around the coastline from Lighthouse Beach at Kovalum.



*A master boatbuilder restoring a traditional kettuvallam at Quilon on the Kerala Backwaters*

beaches back to Kovalum and settle into one of the beachside cafes for a breakfast of fresh fruit, yogurt and the best espresso coffee in India.

**T**ravellers to Kerala include pleasure-lovers, adventurers, naturalists, history and culture buffs and gastronomes - there is something for everyone in this bountiful land of contrasts, traditions and beauty.



*A Mosque on the headland of Vizhinjam fishing harbour near Kovalam*

A brightly decorated Mosque on the headland overlooks the fishing village in a small harbour crowded with painted wooden boats. The rows of thatched cottages lining the beach house a community of exuberant, friendly people who all seem to be involved in the morning fishing activity. After the fish are caught, sorted, bartered and sold, the villagers settle down to the tasks of mending nets, repairing boats, cooking and going to school. It's time to walk around the



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