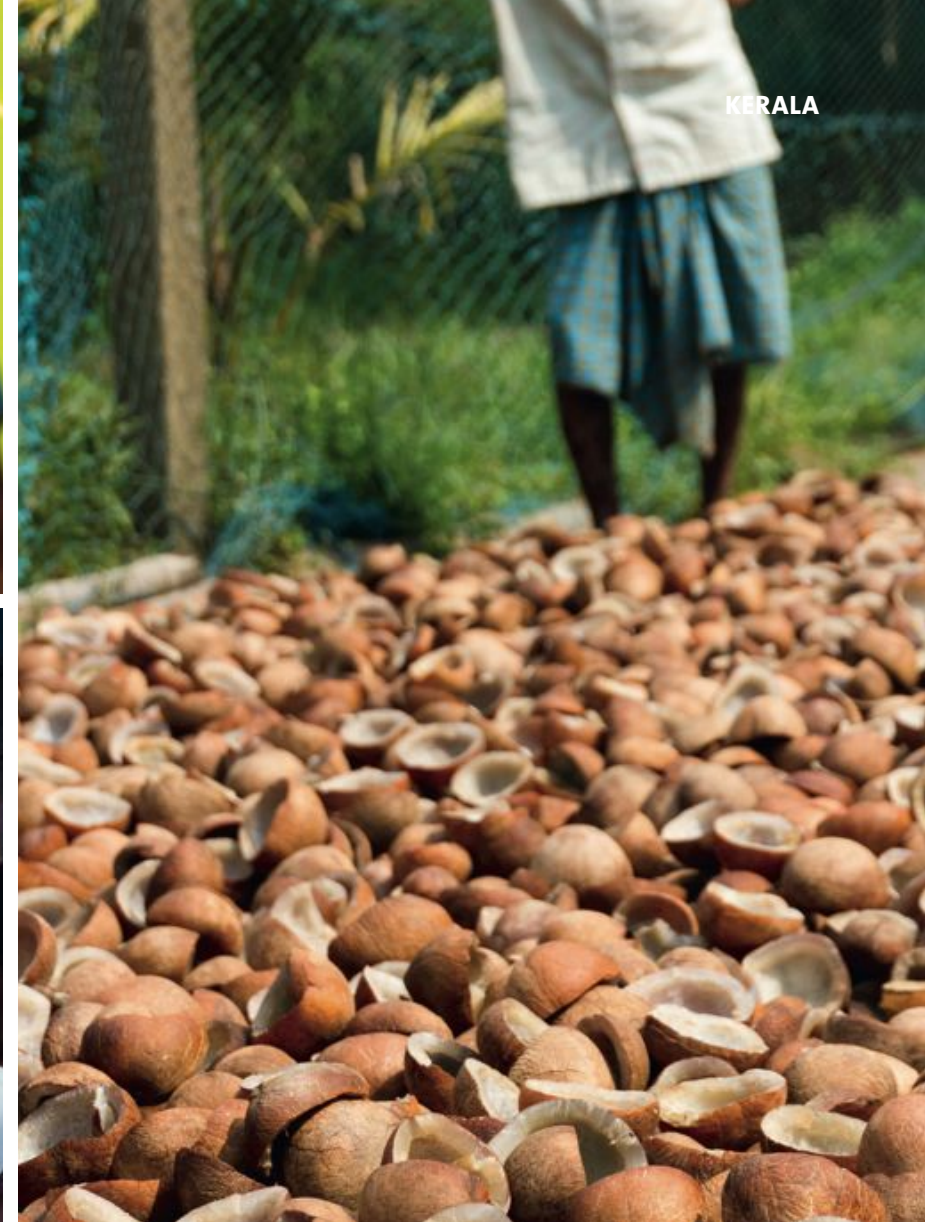


IN SEARCH OF SERENITY

It's easy to lose yourself in this land of backwaters, 'black gold' and bewitching sunsets. Whether you glide along the gentle pulse of Kerala's waterways or opt to cleanse your body and soul at an ayurvedic spa, this serene Indian state beckons spirituality and wonder. Words by Caroline Eden.
Photographs by Slawek Kozdras >>





I'M MET BY AN IMPOSINGLY LARGE medicine cabinet and some grunting noises coming from a side-room. The menu, artfully arranged on a table, lists 'vomiting' and 'blood letting' for those suffering from toxins, while for clients short on time — and hair — there's *nasya* (the snorting of herbal oils) which promises to bestow quick hair growth as well as longevity. Kerala may well be known for its ayurvedic massages and herbal facials, but something tells me this spa, housed in a pretty thatched cottage, is not a fluffy-robles-and-slippers kind of a place.

After a quick assessment, the friendly *vaidyan* (ayurvedic physician) suggests a treatment called 'Siro Abyangham'. Without referring to the menu, I quickly ask if it will hurt and my question is met with a belly-laugh. "Oh, no," Dr Sini replies, "this is a simple Indian head massage. It's good for jetlag. Please, relax." I let out a sigh of relief and for the next 75 minutes, as I lie on a butter-soft massage bed, my head is gently kneaded until I'm ready to sleep for a week.

Marari Beach resort, with its seriously authentic ayurvedic spa, lies on an unspoiled beach near the town of Alappuzha and is surrounded by a handful of peaceful fishing communities and little else. It's a five-star hippie haven, the sort of place that has a platoon of staff for every guest and where you can stroll from bed to sand within minutes. Post-treatment, I briefly considered checking in for life.

To reach Kerala from the holy city of Varanasi, the previous night I had caught three internal flights, zigzagging across the giant abdomen of India. The tiring journey, combined with weeks spent amidst the north Indian stew of rickshaw-wallahs, hotel touts

and beggars had worn me out. I was in need of R&R and first impressions told me I'd come to the right place. Kerala appeared to be awash with those who'd been ruled by their guidebooks for too long and had arrived in search of serenity.

Just 75 miles wide at its broadest point, Kerala is a 360-mile-long neck of land in the southwest of India, wedged between the Arabian Sea and the densely forested Western Ghats to the east. The interesting geographical mix of hills, beaches and backwaters — feeding the watery rice paddies and coconut groves — are a huge magnet for a growing number of foreign visitors, as is the region's colonial past.

With this in mind, I set off for Fort Kochi to learn more about the town's 500-year-old trading history and the merchants who arrived at the Malabar Coast in search of 'black gold' (pepper), cinnamon and nutmeg. I walk through a tangle of atmospheric, quiet streets full of cafes, bookshops and old mansions built by Portuguese, Dutch and British settlers who once made this one of the continent's most prosperous ports. By chance, I stumble upon the oldest European church in India, St

Francis, which, built in 1503 by Portuguese noblemen, still holds services on a Sunday. Mid-week though, I find the pews lined with lens-faced tourists, snapping photographs of large string-pulled punkah fans (portable fans made from the leaf of the palmyra) and the tablets of the Lord's Prayer on the east wall. Vasco da Gama — whose fleet initially set off to look for Christians and spices in 1497 — died in Fort Kochi of fever on Christmas Eve 1524, on his third trip to India. A plaque on the wall informs me his body laid here for a time, until his remains were shipped to Portugal in 1539.

Keen to understand more about Kerala's melting-pot history, I leave the humid church and take an auto-rickshaw to Mattancherry Palace. Constructed by the Portuguese in 1555, it's in the traditional style of a *Nalukettu*

— a typical Keralan mansion with four separate wings opening to a central courtyard. The Portuguese handed the palace to the Raja of Kochi, Veera Kerala Varma, in exchange for trading privileges and it was later renovated by the Dutch — who predictably renamed it the 'Dutch Palace'. A couple of hours slip by in the Coronation Hall as I admire displays of richly coloured turbans and palanquins (covered sedan chairs, carried by four or more bearers) and, with my head tilted back, the carved ceilings and spectacular 16th-century murals of scenes from the Ramayana — the great Hindu poem.

My guidebook suggests no visit to Fort Kochi is complete without a trip to the nearby 400-year-old Paradesi Synagogue, a striking reminder of a once flourishing Jewish community. On arrival, I'm immediately pleased I made the effort. Ornate 18th-century Cantonese floor tiles lie at my feet, while colourful glass chandeliers from Belgium hang above me. Illustrations tell a forgotten history of how the land the synagogue was built on was gifted to the Jewish community by the Raja of Kochi in the 16th century, when in Portuguese Goa, Jews were being evicted from their homes and even burned at the stake. >>

Previous page: A boatman transporting sand.

This page (clockwise from far left): Celebrations outside the Santa Cruz Basilica; Men twist coconut fibre into a strong rope; A bus ticket seller on a journey from Kochi to Alleppey; Coconuts drying in the sun



LIKE A LOCAL

Hot and tired from my history lesson I head to my abode for the next couple of days — Sithara Homestay. Fort Kochi isn't short on rooms like this, usually in large, wedding cake-style villas where visitors can muck in with the locals at a bargain price. Sithara is blissfully quiet, but most people stay here because of its genial owner Mr Harry John, who is sure to give you a friendly greeting dressed in his pristine white *lungi* (sarong).

As I arrive on the verandah, freshly squeezed pineapple juice and spongy *idli* (savoury cake) are laid out before me on a perfectly pressed tablecloth. The little white savoury cakes are surrounded by a spicy vegetable stew called *sambar*, made from dhal, curry leaves and mustard lending it a fresh and spicy flavour. Kerala has very little of the rich, oily Punjabi food generally found in English curry houses and this meal, prepared by Harry's wife Mercy, was delicious and perfect for the humid weather.

Feeling very much at home, I read, sleep and chat to Harry over the course of a couple of days to discover why he opened his home to travellers. He tells me he “enjoys every minute” and has hosted guests from as far afield as Colombia and Estonia. Now his children have left home to pursue successful careers in the Middle East and he has retired from banking, he has the time to dedicate himself

to his guests. With their global outlook and generosity, it's clear Harry and Mercy offer visitors more of an insight into Kerala culture than a concierge at a top hotel ever could.

I take Harry's advice and walk through lanes studded with spice shops to the Kathakali Cultural Centre, tucked behind the fantastically gothic Santa Cruz Basilica. I'm here for some ‘musical meditation’ and the wooden hall, where the performance is to be held, is dark with a musty, slept-in smell. Basil Antony — sitting cross-legged on the stage with his sitar balanced on his left foot — orders attention with a single pluck of his wire *mizrab* (plectrum), sending forth a delicious vibration through the hall.

“In India,” he begins matter-of-factly, “there are 38,500 different musical ragas. This morning we have chosen to perform an ancient and energetic raga for you.” Indian folklore claims that ragas are capable of bringing forth the monsoon or beckoning violent storms; this one summons five eager blonde women to the *dais*, all carefully seated in the lotus position.

“Now,” he continues, as he reorganises the folds of his *salwar kameez* (traditional dress), “close your eyes and come with us as

we start this meditational journey.” Just audible above the hum of the mosquitoes, a drone begins to emanate from the electronic *tanpura*, a guitar-like instrument used to keep a steady ground note to guide the musicians. Greasy with mosquito repellent I make a subtle dash towards the fan, though I quickly realise it's uselessly positioned as high as an elephant's eye.

After the notes of the raga's scale ring out, the playing grows into a rhythmic, dynamic discourse between the sitar and Brijesh Sisarker's tabla. Momentarily, I find myself lost in music as it carries me along the pulse of Kerala's waterways and onwards past palms in the wind. Shortly afterwards, a faint breakfast smell of *masala dosa* wafts in through the windows and I'm brought out of my reverie. I still manage a few more harmonious moments, before the music ends and the lights brighten.

CANOE & COCONUTS

Catapulted back into the bright sunlight, I share a heartfelt goodbye with Harry and head south to India's longest lake. Vembanad is at the heart of Kerala's tourist trade, with thousands of *kettuvallam* (literally ‘tied boats’) plying the backwaters surrounding it. The brackish waterways bordering the coast and seeping far inland are the undisputed attraction of a trip to Kerala and there are literally thousands of houseboats offering >>

From left: A view along one of the main canals; An 84-year-old boat captain rowing across the backwaters





day or overnight trips. It's no wonder the backwaters — believed to have been depleted by a third compared to mid-19th century levels — are under threat from growing pollution.

Rather than book a tour, I travel to the small fishing village of Muhamma on the southwest shore. Here, the dreaded 'Nile cabbage' (water hyacinth) that clogs nearby waterways is replaced by hundreds of dragonflies and cormorants. I sit and watch as along the shore, women wash clothes in the traditional Dhobi fashion, battering the garments onto a soapy flogging stone on the watercourse while elderly fishermen move drowsily along the watery alleys. I'm told the younger men of Muhamma spend their days in dug-out canoes working with a *varandi* (hand dredge) to collect black clams. There was little sign of mechanised intervention anywhere.

I arrange an hour's boat ride on a tiny Tintin-esque canoe with one of the fishermen who politely offer me a modest fare of a hundred rupees (£1.15). At 42 years of age, Prakash has classic south Indian characteristics: he is dark-skinned and whip-thin with a thick moustache to symbolise his masculinity. He explains how the giant web-like Chinese nets on the lake catch a bewildering array of choice seafood — prawns,

catfish, crabs, cuttlefish and mullet. I reach for my camera as the sun dips through rags of snow-white clouds and take a photo or two of the nets, and of Prakash who gives me a rasping laugh, while shaking his head as if to say 'you tourists are obsessed with sunsets'. Which, of course, we are.

Keen to spend my last night with a Keralan family rather than at an anonymous hotel, I travel to Ayana Pampatheeram Homestay, run by Gopal and Padma Nayar. As luck would have it, I arrive in time for dinner, which in Kerala is only ever a good thing. Gopal ushers me to the head of the table with a view over the holy Pampa River, as he positions himself in front of a large plasma television screen, which unsurprisingly shows a cricket match being played somewhere in Delhi. Steel plates of prawn curry, grilled snapper, poppadums and chutney are hurriedly presented by Padma, each one more delicious than the last.

I rise early the following morning, to the sound of a Hindu temple up-river and set off with Gopal for a stroll. His village, home to over a thousand families — all fishermen

and farmers — is rich with the smell of briny water, coconut and cinnamon. Next door, a thin woman is bent double as she crushes spices with a heavy stone rolling pin, running it back and forth across a black stone tablet. Gopal, used to visitors and their thirst for facts, has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge and, as we walk, he points out plants used in ayurveda: "this is *kodappan*, good for diabetes" and, picking up an unidentified weed, "this one's good for blood pressure".

As Gopal explains the different varieties of banana found locally — "22 different types" — a small, bald man, emerges from behind a hut. He greets Gopal and tells me he worked as a 'toddy tapper' — someone who collects sap for palm wine. "Would you like a coconut?" The man asks, but before I can answer he shimmies up the palm, his ankles tied together with a cloth, and cuts loose a nut with his buffalo knee bone. Gopal catches it, and is clearly as impressed by this kind gesture as I am.

I leave Kerala with a little parcel for the journey that Padma had prepared. As I sit at Kochi Airport, I unwrap it and discover a perfect assortment of squishy *idli*, coconut chunks and some fried banana crisps. Simple, fresh and thoughtfully prepared, a quintessentially Keralan breakfast. >>

Above: A boatman down one of Kerala's waterways

essentials KERALA

GETTING THERE

» Emirates operates 16 daily flights from six UK airports (Heathrow, Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle and Glasgow) to Dubai, with a twice-daily service to Kochi or services to Thiruvananthapuram. www.emirates.com

» Qatar Airways flies from Heathrow to Doha five times a day, and from Manchester 10 times a week. Flights from Doha to Kochi are daily. www.qatarairways.com

» Jet Airways flies Heathrow to Kochi via Mumbai. www.jetairways.com

» Average flight time: 10h.

GETTING AROUND

» Auto-rickshaws are plentiful in cities, towns and larger villages.

» Kerala State Road Transport Corporation buses leave Ernakulam's main bus station for most towns and cities.

» The main boat jetty in Ernakulam has services to Willingdon Island and Fort Kochi.

» Private car hire (with a driver) is best for those short on time. Maavalan Travels can organise a comfortable car and English-speaking driver from £26 a day. www.maavalanindiatravels.com.

WHEN TO GO

» Visit between December and February to avoid the worst of the heat and the monsoon season.

NEED TO KNOW

» **Visas:** A pre-paid tourist visa, from £42.20, is required for UK citizens. <http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk>

» **Currency:** Rupee (Rs). £1 = 87 Rs.

» **Health:** Malaria is considered low risk in Kerala but vaccinations may be required. Check with your travel clinic.

» **International dial code:** 00 91.

» **Time:** GMT +5.5.

PLACES MENTIONED

» Marari Beach: www.cghearth.com

» Sithara Homestay: www.sitharahomestay.com

» Kathakali Cultural Centre: www.kathakalicentre.com

» Ayana Pampatheeram Homestay: www.ayanas.netii.net

MORE INFO

» www.keralatourism.org

» *Rough Guide to Kerala*. RRP: £12.99.

» *Berlitz Kerala Pocket Guide*.

RRP: £4.99.

HOW TO DO IT

» Intrepid Travel's new 15-day Spice Trails of Kerala tour from £1,199 (excluding international flights). www.intrepidtravel.com

» Indian specialist Greaves Travel offers a 10-day tailor-made tour to Kerala, from £2,085, including flights. www.greavesindia.co.uk □

