

Kerala

Southern India

words:
Wendy Johnson
photography:
Gary Blake;
Wendy Johnson



THE SOUTHERN INDIAN STATE PROVIDES AN EXOTIC AND UNUSUAL BACKDROP FOR A TOUR WITH A DIFFERENCE. FROM BUSTLING PORTS TO SLEEPY BACKWATERS, ITS COLOUR AND CULTURE IS HARD TO FORGET



Following a luxurious and smooth Jet Airways flight, we are thrown into the chaos that is India on our journey to our first stop at Fort Cochin. Although cocooned within the sanctuary of our chauffeur-driven car, the world around seems in a state of confusion: insane drivers rushing around, dust, cows and the constant sound of our irritated horn as we sweep through the melee to the Brunton Boatyard Hotel. This is the start of a ten day tour of Kerala from the hothouse of the lower plains to the rural backwaters and up into the mountains of the Western Ghats.

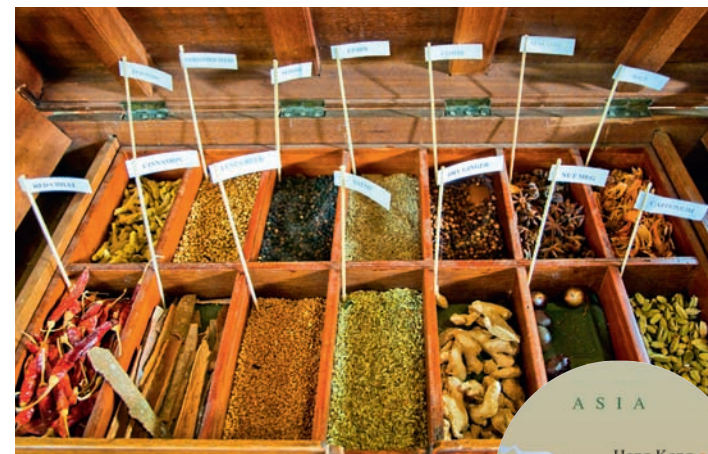
Cochin and Fort Cochin

Cochin was originally a small fishing hamlet, but legend has it that torrential rains filled the Periyar River which broke through to the Arabian Sea and formed the city's vast harbour. As part of the ancient maritime silk route, significant settlements were established here in the early 17th century by Dutch and English traders. Spices grew along the lush, tropical shoreline and on the hills behind and it is said that a blind man could steer a boat to the coast by following the aromas in the offshore wind.

Today, Cochin is an all-weather port strategically located only 10 miles from the east-west trade route from Europe to the Far East and Australia. The port itself is located on Wellington Island and caters for all types and sizes of vessel from QM2 to the Volvo round-the-world boats, which stopped here during their last race.



The Brunton Beach House Hotel (above) is named after George Brunton, the English owner of the former boatyard in Cochin, and provides a calm base in the hectic port. Local-grown spices are on display in the lobby, and guests are welcomed by girls carrying flowers, anointing them with oil and incense to make the traditional binds



ALASTAIR GARROD

Cruising slowly, sitting in a cane chair and sipping the sweetest of local pineapple juice, you get a front row view of the exotic scenery and the rural communities that live along the palm-fringed bank



tourist trail to Mattancherry. Here we visit Saint Francis Church, where Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama was buried in 1524. On to Jew Town and the bustling business and shopping area where antiques and rare wooden and stone artefacts can be picked up.

A seven mile journey then takes us to Jayalakshmi Silk House in New Cochin, which is famous for crafted silks and cotton, hand-woven silks and printed fabrics. As I stand inside the cool, swish, multistorey building I gaze out on the reality of India's social divide with women toiling in the hot afternoon sun, repairing roads. All is serene inside as the young assistants choose a roll of silk and pin the magenta material on me. I look in the mirror to find a new person staring back at me.

Vembanad Lake and the backwaters

Getting into the air-conditioned car is a relief from the steamy heat as we set off the following day for the Coconut Lagoon on Vembanad



Lake. Accessed only by launch, the resort is eco-friendly, even to the extent of keeping three endangered Vechoor cows that graze contentedly around the hotel.

From the mountains in the east, 44 rivers flow to the sea. These rivers and associated lakes and lagoons are linked with canals, making the whole inland area navigable. The traditional rice barges, or kettuvallams, are made by tying wooden planks with rope made from coconut fibre, then coated with black resin made from boiled cashew nut shells. The kettuvallams are the inspiration for the modern house boats now built with up to three bedrooms with en suites. A more conventional, luxurious craft is run by the Oberoi Group.

Our crew of four carry our luggage up the path and on to our large houseboat moored at Alappuzha. Casting off, we meander south, parallel to the Arabian sea, through tranquil rivers and canals, many covered by the invasive but beautiful mauve-flowered African weed. Cruising slowly, sitting in a cane chair and sipping the sweetest of local pineapple juice, I get a front row view of the exotic scenery and the rural communities that live along the palm-fringed banks.

We watch the gruelling work of paddy being cut by workers with colourful hats shielding them from the beating sun. Krishna explains that following the rice harvest, the fields are flooded with water and stocked with fish for three months. When the fish are large enough they are sold and the fields drained before being replanted with rice, and the cycle starts again.

Our lunch stop is brightened by curious local children and their mothers pulling mangoes from the trees and shyly handing them to us.

Food on board is based on the traditional diet of the boatman: fish and vegetables. Most dishes are served on palm leaves and involve coconut in one way or another. We buy beer from a shack accessed by walking a tree trunk across a small waterway. We also find a 'bar' with an earth floor and smoke-blackened walls where we swig alcoholic toddy made from fermented coconut sap.

From the backwaters, we travel to Philipkutty's Farm in Kumarakom, which is only accessible by 'vallam', or country boat, used to transfer guests and their luggage to waterfront villas. It is an unusual hideaway on a working organic spice farm owned and run by the Kutty family. As we sit around the dining table we meet other guests, mainly from Europe. Two are stopping off on their way home from diving in the Maldives and others are fulfilling lifelong dreams of touring India. The gardener takes us on a fascinating tour of the farm and I discover how all my kitchen cupboard spices grow: turmeric, nutmeg, pepper and cinnamon, as well as cashews and cocoa.

Thekkady and the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary

Venturing further afield we set off on the four hour trip to Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary in the Western Ghats. The twisting road works its way through bustling villages, rubber estates, pineapple, tea and coffee plantations, and up through the Cardammon Hills to the blissfully cool mountain air at 1,600 metres.

Originally the hunting grounds of the Maharajah of Travancore, the park is centred around a vast artificial lake created by British settlers in 1895 to supply water to the drier parts of neighbouring Tamil Nadu. On a peninsular in the Periyar Lake stands the Maharajah's former hunting



Clockwise from top right: stumbling upon colourful Hindu festivals in the Vembanad backwaters; the ever-present local cricket game; locals harvest coconuts and build traditional canoes. Opposite: meandering on the kettuvallam





The twisting road works its way through bustling villages, rubber estates, pineapple, tea and coffee plantations, and up through the Cardammon Hills to the blissfully cool mountain air



lodge, now the Lake Palace, with six comfortable suites. Don't expect luxury but from the veranda it is easy to spot wild animals. The water is low during our visit, bringing elephants, wild boar and antelope to the lake's edge, but no sight of the elusive tigers, of which 40 or so remain in the park.

Four years ago the authorities started a scheme to pay the local people to guide tourists rather than poach the animals and so I am taken on a three hour early morning trek looking for game. Africa this is not, but we see black monkeys eating flowers of the coral tree, bonnet macaques, giant malabar squirrels tucking into small, sweet figs and buffalo grazing the edge of the reservoir. Some of the 300 or so



elephants are quietly grazing nearby, barely detectable through the thick vegetation.

Temple festival

We travel back down the mountain and into the steamy heat of a temple festival. Locals in their best clothes with frangipani woven into their glistening palm-oiled hair are gathering. Twenty elephants elaborately decorated, sprayed by hose to keep them cool, line up under an awning and sway gently as they wait for the largest elephant to appear from the temple. Young boys dressed in ceremonial wear mount nimbly and raise colourful sunshades while frighteningly loud firecrackers are let off in the crowd. With a fanfare from the nadaswarams (giant oboes), the procession moves off with the thronging crowds just managing to keep ahead of the huge animals. With the blaring music, heavy drumming and fireworks, it is a frenetic experience.

Tour's end at Marari Beach

Saying our farewells to Krishna, our final destination is Mararikulam, an hour away from Cochin, and the Marari Beach Resort, where 75 thatched cottages are modelled on those belonging to local fishermen. The palm-fringed beach is lapped by the cooling Arabian sea and is a perfect place for a few days of relaxation before returning home.

This is my second visit to India with a gap of 20 years. Things have undoubtedly changed for the better, but my overriding impression is a country teeming with colour and people striving to improve their lot, and with a politeness and courtesy that has long gone from the West.

Locals demonstrate how to harvest rubber near Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (far left); a tea plantation at Thekkandy and a small temple provide fascinating stop-offs along the way. From July to September at Champakulam, locals turn out to watch the colourful snake boat races (left). Manned by musicians and singers, oarsmen row to the rhythm of local songs

