



Charter INDIA

Spice of life

The Kerala backwaters, a ‘top 10 paradise’, have a rich history of spice growing. *Gary Blake* took a trip on a rice boat



The lush, peaceful backwaters retain a timeless charm

It is said that a blind man could steer a boat to the coast of Kerala, following the aromas on the offshore wind. This narrow strip of fertile land in Southern India is well within the humid equatorial tropics, a perfect hothouse climate for growing spices such as cinnamon, cassia, cardamom, ginger, and turmeric, known and traded in the ancient eastern world, and so sought after 200 years ago for peping up the flavours of the otherwise bland food of Europe, that one ounce of cloves was equal in value to an ounce of gold.

As part of the ancient maritime silk route and just 10 miles off the present-day main international shipping routes, significant spice trading settlements were established here in the early 17th century by the Dutch and the English.



Left: Traditional build still continues

Right: a working rice cargo boat



Above: At Maria beach resort

Left: 'Tied accommodation' - hotel boat based on traditional rice boats

Right: Food served on palm leaves



Alappuzha is the centre of Kerala, known as the 'rice bowl of the country' and our chartered 'rice boat' - 'kettuvallam' - is based on the working rice boats, still seen today, that can carry up to 30 tons of bagged rice, spices and coir from the isolated villages of the interior to the towns. They are poled by two men and carry a small rig to sail across the lakes.

Tied together with coir

Kettuvallam literally means 'boat tied' - constructed without a single nail used. Even these modern new-build boats are made the same way from huge planks of jack wood (*Artocarpus hirsuta*) or 'aanjili' and joined with coir, then coated with a caustic black resin made from boiled cashew kernels and fish oil to waterproof.

They measure 20-25m (66-82ft) in length and 4-4.5m (13-15ft) across. One of the distinctive features of the kettuvallam design is the winged awnings, formed by opening up each side of the arched canopy to provide for cool circulation and shade.

The canopies are made from split bamboo, lashed with coir binding and covered with palm fronds. There are single or double bedrooms, with en-suite bathrooms and western loos, hot and cold water, air conditioning and ample mosquito netting over the beds. There are loungers, each with its own drink tray, on the top deck.

We had a guide with us for the tour who explained that before concrete roads, Kerala's regions were so cut off from each other that only a primitive water system, with canoes, connected them all. The 44

mountain rivers formed a complex system that backed up at sea level into natural dams to become the backwaters. Being so isolated, legend has it, they had 47 kingdoms, 47 languages, and... 47 kings.

We started in Alappuzha, meandering southwards down parallel to the Arabian sea onto what would be a big loop inland and back to our starting point three days later. We had a driver and three crew who doubled up as boat handlers and kitchen staff.

Cutlery optional

Food on board is based on the traditional diet of the boatman, fish and vegetables. Our rice and curried food was served on palm leaves. Cutlery was optional, otherwise we observed their tradition of using the sacred right hand for eating.

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With over 100 oarsmen per boat, plus 25 singers and four helmsmen, snake boat racing is the world's largest team sport



Snake boat racing

Another, unparalleled attraction in Kerala is the Snake Boat Races. Our round trip ran down the race course for this annual festival. The races are held in connection with Onam, the harvest festival in August/September.

Scores of long snake boats and other smaller craft participate in these events. The largest team sport in the world, the races themselves are preceded by colourful water parades. Usually, a

snake boat is manned by four helmsmen, 25 singers and 100-125 oarsmen, who row in unison to the fast rhythm of vanchippattu (song of the boatman). Thousands of people crowd the water's edge to cheer the huge black crafts as they slice through the waters to a spectacular finish. The oldest of these events have curious legends and myths attached to their origin, myths closely linked to the rustic people and their beliefs.

Alcohol was available, but had to be ordered prior to boarding, otherwise refreshing drinks were served of coconut juice, mineral water and soft drinks.

It was an excellent way to look into the various facets of village life and the communities that live along the banks. Cruising slowly, seated in a cane chair and sipping coconut juice, or the sweetest of pineapple juices, we had a front-row view of the life of the paddy farmers toiling in the field with colourful 'umbrella' hats to shield them from the day's blistering heat.

They restrict themselves to working mornings only before a full douche in the rivers and lunch from their tiffin boxes. The majority of the population in Kerala are dependent directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood.

We saw itinerant duck farmers, who herd thousands of ducklings along the rivers for four months, selling them off as ducks at the end of their growth.

Toddy shops

Then there are the local toddy shops, the Irish-type drinking bars but with earthen floors with the alcoholic 'toddy' made from fermented coconut juice.

The landscape was rich dark greenery with splashes of vivid colours of saris or of exotic flowers, plus ancient temples and

churches. Our first night, near a village, meant an evening stroll through the red earth streets amongst the occasional little palm walled crofts processing chilli beans into powder beans into powder with their overhead belt-driven machinery.

Our pale skin was a curiosity as the southern Indians are very dark and our western, 'film star' looks attracted admiring children whom we rewarded by giving out much appreciated ballpoint pens which we carried like currency.

These weren't impoverished begging children but bright-eyed with a quest to read and write. Kerala has achieved 98 per cent literacy, the highest in India.

The water fern that looks so beautiful, flowering in the languid lakes and rivers, and which supports bird and insect life, is now called 'African weed', as it is thought to be from seeds off the ships from Africa. It now chokes the rivers and canal access to Kochi (Cochin), the main trading port.

So bridges and tarmac roads now carry brightly coloured huge trucks with names of the produce on their livery, Rice, Copra, Jute, Coconut, denoting their cargo on its way to the final food processing stage, the wholesale markets of Kochi.

Beautiful as the backwaters are, a three-day trip, within a longer visit to India, was sufficient to experience them.



Fact file 'Top 10 paradise'

Kerala has been named as one of the 'ten paradises of the world' and '50 places of a lifetime' by the *National Geographic Traveller* magazine. Blessed with great natural beauty, the backwaters are unique to Kerala and an abundant rainfall means lush greenery pretty much throughout the year.

Airports in the three major cities Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode, provide international and domestic connections. We went with Jet Airways, London-Mumbai-Kochi.

COST OF OUR BOAT TRIP: The rates on a standard accommodation houseboat are from R7,500 (about £100) with three meals for two persons per night in a double room Kerala.

Booking enquiries: KTDC Limited, Shanmugham Road, Ernakulam, Kochi - 682 011, India. Tel: +91-484-2353234 www.ktdc.com