

SOUTH KERALA, INDIA

A Passage Through the
Subcontinent's Coastal Paradise

Story and photography by Pam Taylor.





As I dip into the Arabian Sea lapping the shores of Kerala, in the distance, two men in a small dugout glide across the saffron-globed sun. I don't mind dunking fully clothed into these warm waters because it's been a dusty day of travel here to Varkala Beach. Wading out, I marvel at how this famed Malabar Coast on the southern-most tip of India has attracted such a myriad of visitors over thousands of years.

For at least two millennia, ships filled with Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Jews, Chinese and later, European merchants and missionaries found a lucrative haven here at the former princely state of Travancore. But in 2000, ever since the local government began promoting Kerala as "God's Own County," tourists have been flocking to this sliver of land sandwiched between the Western Ghats Mountain Range to the east and the sea to the west. They come to unwind on houseboats in its languid back waters, get rejuvenating massages, marvel at breathtaking scenery and experience colorful religious festivals.

Varkala, a small Hindu pilgrimage village was "discovered" by itinerant backpackers years ago. Each morning, foreign sun-worshippers crawl out of their darkened rooms and spread towels on the beach at the foot of red laterite cliffs. Descending the steep stairs, I walk past the sunbathers, to a nearby beach called *Papanasam*, which means "sin destroyer" in Malayalam because its waters purify all those who come. Here, a Hindu holy man chants as he performs a *puja* ceremony for a somber-looking family. Afterward, they all walk into the sea to scatter marigolds and ashes of a deceased relative into the surf.

That evening, a *Kathikali* dance-drama will be performed in a corrugated tin "theater" tucked away behind one of the restaurants that line the cliffs. Rested after the naps in the hot soporific afternoon, the performers beckon me to watch as they apply garish make-up—green for a god, black for a demon, and bright red lipstick with black eyeliner for a seductress, played by a man. Makeup complete, they don colorful, heavily pleated skirts over layers of plastic rice bags used as underskirts and *mudis*, headgear of carved wood or papier-mâché. Thus weighed down, the actors waddle on stage. Yet, once the ritual oil lamp

has been lit and the play begins, these highly trained actors/dancers show a grace that defies their bulky gear. For an hour—a tourist-friendly sliver of what would normally be a multi-day production—the demon actor's cries punctuate the steady beat of drum and cymbal, as musicians chant the timeless story.

Another Keralan ancient art, Ayurvedic medicine, with its focus on treating imbalances in the body, draws "health tourists." After spotting posters around Kovalum, another beach colony south of Varkala, I decide to try an oil massage. Rejecting the outcrop of seedy huts mushrooming in the moist palm groves behind town, I seek out a government-certified health spa and discover a resort catering to foreigners looking for monthlong treatments, but willing to take on a day tripper. I soon find myself on a bench in a traditional Kerala three-story wood house getting an orientation from the manager, who tells me "a one-time treatment will be rejuvenating for you, but not deeply cleansing, you understand." For my part, I'm happy to avoid a monthlong regime of rising at 4 a.m. for yoga and massage, a diet of vegetables and legumes, and the deep-cleansing with induced vomiting and enemas. However, he promises my session will include a foot massage—something my sore feet welcome after weeks of travel.

I'm led to a palm-thatched, mud-walled hut, where a trim young masseuse bows and greets me with a palms-together *namaste*. Speaking no English, she indicates I should trade my clothes for the little modesty diaper she hands me. Then, she has me sit on a low stool as she begins the session by massaging warm oil onto my scalp. The foot massage, however, is not at all what I had envisioned. Rather than rubbing my feet, she lays me down on a floor mat while she clutches a twisted rope suspended from the ceiling. Then, balancing herself athletically, she begins to massage my body with long, sure strokes of her foot. Afterward, she powders and sluices me with ladlefuls of water. I feel like a child, or more accurately an aged, infirm relative, well cared for and pampered by this competent young woman. I later learn that every fighter in the ancient Keralan martial arts begins their daily regime with one of these vigorous rubdowns.

Refreshed, or more accurately, dazed, I return to the nearby low-rise con-

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crete jungle of hotels, restaurants and cafes that the once tiny fishing village of Kovalam has become. I float around the rest of the day; my sleep that night is deep and dreamless. The next morning, I'm drawn toward the morning chants of fisherman working on the crescent-shaped beach, where large white dug-outs with green designs perch among piled coils of rope. Teams of sinewy Muslim men in wet, flowered *mundus* tucked up between their brown legs haul nets through the shallows, bringing in a meager catch of fish. A wizened old man looks at the net, shakes his head and comments in English, "there are no more fish." Certainly none of the big seer, kingfish or swordfish now caught offshore by large commercial trawlers to sell to tourists at the open-air restaurants lining the beach.

Although the local fishermen struggle to maintain their traditional livelihood, Kerala is a prosperous state. It boasts more than 90 percent literacy, has the lowest infant mortality rates in India and has life expectancy rates rivaling developed countries. For more than 50 years, it has been a democratically elected communist state. It also is the cleanest state—one without the chaos, dirt and beggars that hound other parts of the subcontinent. What's more, it's possible to get from site to site in Kerala with a short train, taxi or ferry ride.

Life in Kerala is dictated by water—both the sea and the vast network of *kuttanad*, backwaters of large lakes linked by 1,500 kilometers of canals. I hop on the eight-hour ferry north from Kolam to Alappazha and get a boater's glimpse of life unfolding along the banks. Women come to whack their laundry on the concrete steps along the canals. Laughing children whoop as they jump into the cooling waters and men soap up their glistening black hair. There is a brief frenzied stop for lunch as foreigners queue up on the dock with sari-clad women and Indian men in casual western clothes. Lunch is curried rice, all neatly eaten by Keralites with their right hands as they chatter in break-neck, tongue-tripping Malayalam.



At Amritpuri, the pink-towered ashram of Amma—the Hindu-hugging saint who attracts hug-hungry devotees from throughout India and the world—I stop to spend time at the ashram. Although I'm impressed by her many charitable works, I wimp out of staying up all night for a hug. Meanwhile, thousands of pilgrims sing along with a bouncing ball on large screens, projecting the words as loud speakers blare devotional chants in Malayalam. Fleeing the crowds, I trudge across the pink bridge and grab a ferry heading north.

At Alappuzha, or Allepey, dubbed "the Venice of the East" by the British, multi-colored lights enliven the darkness. Allepey of-



Photograph by Kent Crawford



fers a choice of Kerala heritage hotels or modest homestays. Opting for the latter, I'm welcomed to a red-brick thatched roof cottage, one of several in a garden compound owned by English-speaking Christians. Its living room, complete with a computer available for guests, has heavy, dark furniture and pictures of Jesus on the green walls. The following day, I'm delighted to watch as the women, dressed in cotton saris or *churidas* (leggings and a tunic), prepare a traditional meal. They scrape coconut, pound spices with a stone mortar and pestle, and cook curry in a clay pot over a wood fire. Several other foreigners and I share these home-cooked meals at the family dining table.

When I mention I want to try one of the region's famous houseboats, the husband arranges an overnight cruise on his *kettuwalam*, a rice barge-turned-houseboat. Perched on a chair at the front of the barge, the pilot steers through the brackish waters, while the engineer fuels the boat from

behind and the cook throws a fishing line over the side. Larger barges, boasting air-conditioning and hot tubs, glide by. Dinner, at a red-checked, cloth-covered table, is rice, vegetables and freshly caught pan-fried fish. Afterward, we moor by a small village squeezed on a narrow strip of land and I take a stroll. Along the canal, uniformed school girls amble by and young children, hands outstretched, beg "candy, candy." I shake my head and walk on past small shops lit by bare bulbs, and further on past young men in crocheted white caps entering a green mosque compound. Later, back on the boat in my comfy bed, I hear young women singing over a loud speaker from a nearby church.

Back on land, the next evening, I visit a church festival near Alleppey. St. Thomas, the apostle, came to Kerala in 52 A.D. and established the first Christian churches here. Today, pilgrims stream onto the sandy church grounds as vendors hawk balloons, rosaries, nuts and snacks. Bare-chested men

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in white sarongs beat drums while sari-clad women with ceremonial parasols parade by, trailed by robed elder priests carrying large crosses and elder women shouldering an image of St. Mary encased in a glass and wooden box. As dusk softens to night, a loudspeaker blares tinny canned music, and multi-colored lights strung onto the church façade spin in dizzying improbable designs—like a fast changing Las Vegas neon sign.

In this cacophonous venue of loudly blaring music and traditional rhythmic drumming, I wonder, once again, at the complexities of life in Kerala. I am awed at Kerala's historic ability to welcome people of different nationalities and beliefs. Here, Hindus, Muslims and Christians live and work together, for the most part in harmony. And it's the Keralites' relaxed ways, their tolerance of diversity and their ever-ready smiles that stay in my mind as I leave these golden shores.



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