SLEEPY KERALA

จากบ้านในเรือสู่หุบเขาแห่งชา พบกับอีกมุมมองอันเงียบสงบของอินเดียใน Kerala

FROM HOUSEBOATS TO HILL-TOP TEA ESTATES, DISCOVER INDIA'S CALMER SIDE IN KERALA

Words and photos by Dave Stamboulis


St. Francis Church

A dugout canoe drifts by our boat, hauling cut grass to a nearby market, its rowers silently paddling across the murky Vembanad Lake. On the other side of us several kingfishers alight on floating water lilies, oblivious to our presence. My partner turns to me, raises her glass of wine in a toast, and returns to her armchair, snuggling up with a good book. I lie back and think to myself that this is the most relaxed I have felt in years. While many foreigners imagine India to be horrendously overcrowded, dirty, and hassle filled, Kerala dispels most of these preconceptions. Traditional houseboats plying the backwaters of India's southern state are one of the world's great escapes, so much so that *National Geographic* recently included them in their millennium collectors' edition "50 Destinations of a Lifetime" feature.

The backwaters are comprised of a chain of lakes, canals and lagoons that lie just off the Malabar Coast and Arabian Sea, fed by around 40 rivers that snake their way out of the Western Ghat Mountains down to the ocean. Kerala has been one of the world's largest spice exporters for centuries, and the backwaters were used extensively to bring spices, and later tea, from the interior to the sea. These days, the *kettuvallams*, traditional rice grain barges that were used to transport rice from the wetland paddies to the coast, have become a big draw as luxury houseboat vacations for tourists. Made with thatched roofs and over 25 metres long, the elegant boats used to be the preferred form of merchant travel prior to paved roads and motorised vehicles.

One can drift through Kerala's labyrinthine of lakes and canals, enjoying the verdant scenery and birdlife, or the cultural aspect of the backwaters such as the coir industry, in which coconut husk fibres are used to make rope fishing nets, and other local products that the native Keralite people use in their daily lives. Better yet, it's just as pleasant to do absolutely nothing except sit out on deck in an armchair with one's feet propped up and enjoy the backwater scenery over a cup of Indian *chai* or a cold Kingfisher beer. The houseboats come equipped with all amenities: fans and air-conditioning, Western toilets, televisions, showers, and period-piece dining rooms and bedrooms. Additionally, they are staffed with cooks and attendants, and just about every whim and nuance is catered to, ensuring a journey of bliss.

KOCHI, A MOSAIC OF CULTURES

Amazingly, the peaceful backwaters are just a stone's throw from Kerala's capital of Kochi. Formerly known as Cochin or Fort Cochin, Kochi has been revered throughout the ages as the subcontinent's spice trade centre. Jewish, Roman, Arabic and Chinese merchants have visited Kochi since the 13th century, and the city became Europe's first settlement in India when the Portuguese colonised it in the early 1500s. The Dutch and later the British also had their periods of rule, and even today, Kochi is characterised by its large number of ethnic minorities, ranging from Tamils to Jews to Gujaratis to Syrian Christians, along with the largest concentration of Catholic churches one will find in Asia outside of the Philippines.

Vestiges of Kochi's multiculturalism can be seen everywhere, from the city's iconic Chinese fishing nets, which date back to the 14th century and are still used sparingly today, to the imposing Santa Cruz Basilica Cathedral and the St. Francis Church, the first European churches built in Asia (1502 and 1503) and still the sites of well-attended masses. In the western part of the city, Kochi's Jew Town is a living heritage site with the Paradesi Synagogue at its centre. In 1808, the warden of the synagogue's father built a Portuguese-style mansion named Koder House. Still standing, it is just one example of the

TRAVEL TIPS

GO: All of India's major airlines as well as numerous world carriers fly into Kochi (Fort Cochin) International Airport, which is just an hour's drive from the backwaters and 3–4 hours from Munnar. High season runs from November–March with a shoulder season of August–October.

DO: In addition to an overnight houseboat stay, canal tours on small dugout canoes are recommended for seeing village life on intimate and slow terms. If you happen to be in Kerala in August, the **Nehru Trophy Boat Races** are a must see, as locals race traditional "snake boats" (crafted wood longboats in which 100 oarsmen can sit) through the backwaters. For *kathakali* performances, the **Kathakali Cultural Centre** in Kochi has daily shows along with classes and other offerings. *Tel: +91 484 221 5827, www.kathakalicentre.com*

STAY: The **Kumarakom Lake Resort** is the best in the region, offering houseboats and private villas on the shores of Vembanad Lake. The resort specialises in luxury houseboat trips throughout the backwaters. *Tel: +91 481 252 4900, www.kumarakomlakeresort.in*
The **Koder House Boutique Heritage Hotel** has a fantastic location in Fort Cochin opposite the harbour and Chinese fishing nets, and the hotel's unique restaurant serves sumptuous Keralan and Jewish cuisine. There are not many rooms at this gem, so make sure to book in advance especially during high season. *Tel: +91 484 221 8485, www.koderhouse.com*
The Windermere Estate Plantation and Retreat in Munnar perches on the edge of a cardamom and pepper estate that is also home to plentiful bird life and sweeping views over the Western Ghats, with lovely gardens to relax in along with fabulous home cooking to boot. *Tel: +91 486 523 0512, www.windermeremunnar.com*


Punting along the backwaters


Chinese fishing nets


A man prepares for a kathakali performance


Spices for sale in Kochi


A street-side bracelet vendor

fine colonial architecture one will find meandering the pleasant back streets of Fort Cochin. Today, the house serves as a fine boutique hotel and gives a sense of what life must have been like in the Kochi of old.

Kochi prides itself on culture and spectacle. Leading the way is *kathakali*, Kerala's famed dance-drama performance art in which long periods of training, make-up and ritual are fused into a colourful and mesmerising event. While short performances are staged for visiting tourists, the real deal still involves temple shows that run all night long, and are a major part of the elaborate Keralan festival calendar each year. On a brief stopover in Kochi, trying to catch a *kathakali* performance, we accidentally arrived two hours early and were rewarded with the opportunity to watch dancers putting on their extensive make-up and transforming into the hypnotising characters they portray.

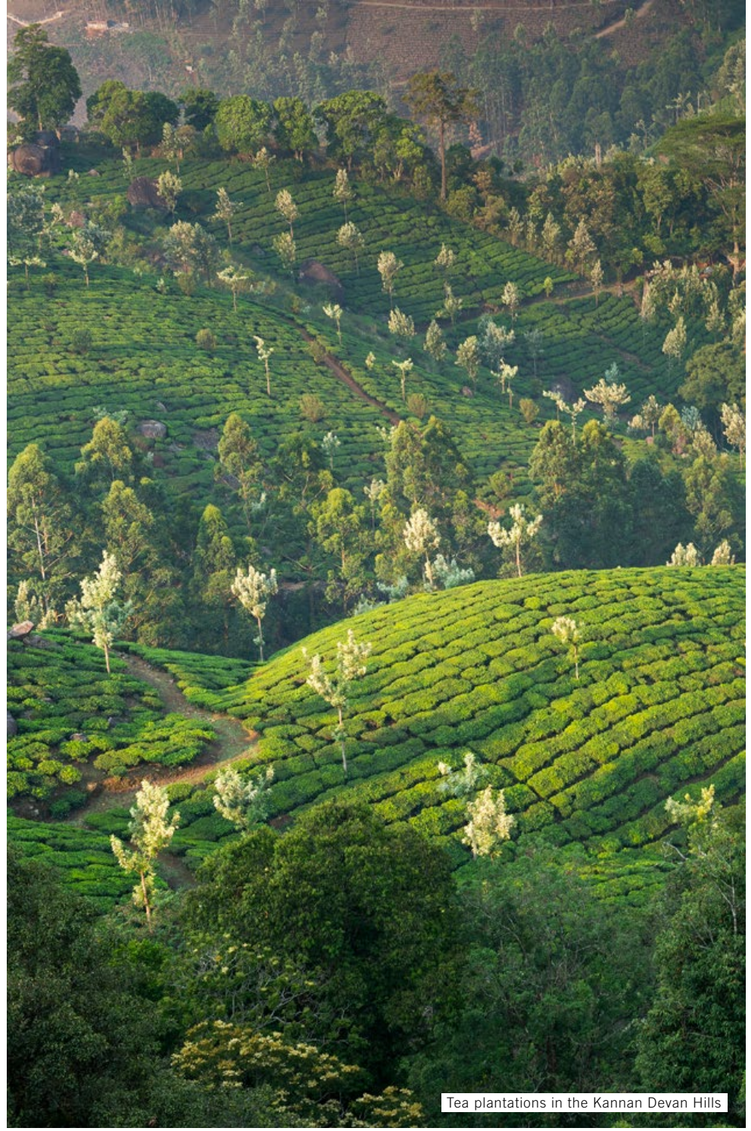
Kerala takes great pride in being India's most literate state (with a 94 per cent literacy rate), and has the highest life expectancy and lowest population growth rate as well – all of which defies the normal preconceptions of India. Nor are tourists hassled by rickshaw drivers or touts like one finds in the north of the country. Yet the coastal heat and humidity can be wearing, and if a break from Kochi is needed, in addition to renting a houseboat one can head for the cooler climes of green Munnar.

MUNNAR, KERALA'S BACK GARDEN

Munnar was once the summer capital of the British in southern India, and it is easy to see why. The small hill station sits on a plateau in the Kannan Devan Hills at 1,500 metres. The temperature is always comfortable, there is abundant rainfall, and the entire area is composed of an artist's palette of every shade of green imaginable, with endless tea and cardamom spice plantations blanketing the landscape. The British started plantations here in the late 1800s, finding the mix of cool weather, rainfall, and quality soil perfect for tea growing. Later on, Tata, the world's largest tea company, took control of much of the area, and these days Munnar has become a tourist paradise due to its cool weather, misty mountain panoramas and rapturous seas of green.

There is plenty to do in Munnar, ranging from an obligatory visit to the Tata Tea Museum at the Nallathani Estate (which gives excellent displays of the entire history of tea growing in the region), to hiring a tuk tuk and heading up to Top Station, a 1,700-metre-high viewpoint taking in magnificent panoramas of the Western Ghats and the adjacent Tamil Nadu State, along with the never ending verdant tea views. Just as enjoyable is relaxing in a hammock in one of the colonial plantation bungalow resorts that have sprung up in the area.

Back on our houseboat, I awake to find I've slipped into a deep slumber in the afternoon heat, dreaming of lush tea plantations and Chinese fishing nets against burnt orange sunsets. The lake water drifts languidly by, and the only sound to be heard is the swaying of nearby palms in the breeze. I realise I have found the India of my dreams.


Tea plantations in the Kannan Devan Hills

หลีกลี้หนีความวุ่นวาย

เคราลาทางตอนใต้ของอินเดียจะลบภาพความวุ่นวายของอินเดียออกจากใจคุณทันทีเพราะนี่คือหนึ่งใน 50 จุดหมายต้องเยือนในชีวิตนี้ของ National Geographic แหล่งน้ำแห่งนี้ประกอบด้วยทะเลสาบ คูคลองและลากูนจำนวนมากใกล้อ่าวมาลาบาร์และทะเลอาหรับ รัฐเคราลานี้จัดได้ว่าเป็นผู้ส่งออกเครื่องเทศรายใหญ่ที่สุดรายหนึ่งของโลกมาเป็นเวลาหลายศตวรรษแล้วโดยใช้ทางน้ำเหล่านี้เองในการขนส่งไปออกทะเล เรือขนข้าวและธัญพืชเพื่อไปขายในสมัยก่อนก็ถูกดัดแปลงมาใช้เป็นที่พักสำหรับนักท่องเที่ยวอย่างลงตัว ด้วยความยาวกว่า 25 เมตร มุมหลังคาจักสาน พาทุกชีวิตล่องไปตามลำน้ำต่างๆเพื่อชมธรรมชาติ นกนานาชนิด วิถีชาวบ้านที่นำเอาเส้นใยมะพร้าวมาทำเป็นแหจับปลา ฯลฯ หรือจะนอนยืดเท้าอยู่บนเรือเฉยๆพร้อมเครื่องดื่มเย็นๆในมือก็สุขใจเป็นที่สุดแล้ว เพราะเรือที่พักเหล่านี้มีทั้งพัดลม เครื่องปรับอากาศ ห้องน้ำแบบตะวันตก ฝักบัวอาบน้ำและทุกอย่างพร้อม แถมยังมีกุ๊กและพนักงานคอยเอาใจทุกสิ่งอย่างตลอดการเดินทาง

นอกจากนั้นยังมีสิ่งน่าสนใจอีกมากที่เมืองหลวงของรัฐเคราลาซึ่งมีชื่อว่าโคชิ เพราะนี่คือจุดที่พ่อค้าชาวยิว โรมัน อาระบิกและจีนมาพบปะกันเมื่อสมัยศตวรรษที่ 13 ก่อนที่ชาวโปรตุเกสจะมายึดครองสลับกับชาวดัทช์และชาวอังกฤษเป็นช่วงๆ เป็นเหตุให้โคชิมีอารยธรรมและวัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลายเป็นที่สุด ปิดท้ายด้วยเมืองมันนาร์อันเขียวชอุ่ม อากาศเย็นสบายตลอดปี มีทิวทัศน์ปกคลุมด้วยไร่ชาและกระวานสุดลูกหูลูกตา

นักท่องเที่ยวสามารถเดินทางไปยังจุดหมายทั้งสามนี้ได้โดยสะดวก สายการบินใหญ่ๆของอินเดียมีเครื่องไปลงที่โคชิแล้วจากนั้นจึงต่อรถราวหนึ่งชั่วโมงไปลงเรือข้างต้นหรือนั่งรถยาว 3-4 ชั่วโมงก็จะไปถึงมันนาร์