

SUBCONTINENTAL DRIFT



At one with nature
in India's southwest

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In her 1997 Man Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things*, set in Kerala, Arundhati Roy writes, “The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust-green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air.” And now, after four visits and a stash of experiences, let me count the ways this southwest coastal state of India has captured and held my heart.

Coconut palms are spread like a great feathery quilt over Kerala. Green is not a colour here but a living substance that glows and reaches and shines, suffusing everything with aqueous light. This state has a plantation lushness that couldn't be more different to the desert regions of India's north. My memories are riven with water, too, across a silvery universe of rivers, lakes, tributaries and estuaries that runs parallel to the Malabar Coast for about 150km between Kollam in the south and Kochi, the capital, in the north.

This vast network of navigable waterways

is viewed by most visitors from converted trading boats, about 25m long and 4m wide, and known as kettuvallam (literally, boat with knots). They contain not a single nail but are constructed of rainforest jackwood planks lashed by coir ropes and tarred with a resin made from boiled cashew kernels. The profile is low, the draught shallow, and the round roof thatched with palm fronds. The boats have been used for centuries to transport coconuts, cardamom, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and vanilla. I fancy the ribbed carapace is the shape of an armadillo. They glide with a purposefulness and eerie grace in their incarnation as houseboats, typically with one to four cabins. Most of the tourist variety are diesel powered but move satisfyingly slowly so there's ample time to observe the minutiae of life along the aquatic highways just inland from the Arabian Sea.

Set off cruising from Kumarakom or Alappuzha (formerly Alleppey) and allow at least two full days. My journeys have been aboard humble models but all have felt authentic and magical, particularly when a grander, gaudier example has charged past and set us a-rocking. On one occasion, our boat lurched wildly in the wake of a real beauty, its top deck occu-

pied by imperious socialites in gem-coloured saris, trilling and fussing like roosting tropical birds. Bollywood music blared out, all but shaking fruit out of the trees. "From Delhi," muttered our deckhand, shaking his head wearily as he rescued my ice cream float and held it high to stop foam cascading towards our neighbours. I waved at the jolly ladies, who blew me a collective kiss.

Kerala means place of coconuts and its waterways are rimmed with generously giving palms. Coconut fibre is wound into ropes and manufactured into matting. The thin juice is drunk, the jellied flesh eaten with a dusting of spice or dried to copra, pulped into chutneys, creamed into curries, grated into sweet candies. The oil is collected for cooking, the wood fashioned into furniture, coconut shells become drinking cups, flower sap fermented into a toddy with the kick of a donkey.

A gentle kettuvallam journey is not the stuff of high adventure. There's no real effort involved, although I do believe robust curiosity burns kilojoules. The scenery comes to you. Deep canals are the colour of Japanese powdered matcha. Clumps of water hyacinth often clog bends and banks and must be poled out of the way by a boatman such as Mohamed, who told me his "best" dream would be to see a kangaroo. "Me too," agreed the entertainingly named Captain Marvel and they both hopped about on the deck as the boat rocked in rhythm with our childish laughter. Notebook jottings? Broad-leafed banana trees curled with pepper vines bent low to the marshy ground. Cement-block huts so tenuously sited that their foundations almost dip, like sodden hems, into the water. Air scented with a larder of spices. The dark embrasure of a transplanted Amazon, with arched palms brushing our boat, giving way to a mini-Nile of coracle boats with flour-sack sails and kids skylarking in the shallows.

Each morning, after breakfast of small, sugary bananas yanked from the nearest tree, toast and English marmalade, and strong southern Indian coffee, the cook approaches and takes "orders" for lunch. Dried goods and staples are stored on board but there's no menu and we must rely on buying seafood from passing traders. This could mean flash-fried tiger prawns spritzed with lime, a pomfret curry humming with tamarind. Even a drink on deck during the evening "unhappy hour", when haloes of mosquitoes hover above our heads, is made memorable when a plate appears of thin banana crisps deep-fried in coconut oil, salted and spiced with turmeric. One day Mohamed asked me to name

my favourite fruit. Apples, I replied, or pineapples. Less than an hour later he had "acquired" a hard, green apple from someone's garden and procured me a pineapple from a jetty market. "How much for the pineapple?" I asked. "Free," he said, refusing my rupees. "She's my grandma." The woman at the stall waved at me. "She wants to see a kangaroo, too," he laughed. More marvellous nonsense.

Passengers become aware of the diurnal rituals of life in a water world, which start with villagers bathing at dawn by the banks; in the purple-jade shadows of jackfruit trees, women perform gymnastic feats of modesty, unfurling and rearranging simple saris, supervising toddlers and scouring cooking pots. I watch children in impossibly white shirts bolting to catch a ferry to school. I lose my bearings in this world of intimacy and activity but later, over a map, can see we've looped around, now heading back to Kumarakom

across Lake Vembanad, where fishermen pull catches of mussels, and herons and egrets whirl off as our kettuvallam parts the water in a dead-straight spine.

Kerala has long been a magnet for invasion, riding waves of trade and colonisation, from Syrian Christians to Portuguese, Dutch and British. There is high literacy, low birth rate, a relaxed attitude towards religion, state government that swings between the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party, a tourism industry built on the motto of God's Own Country, ayurvedic wellness and engagement with nature. I recall at one lakeside village, Captain Marvel pointed to a Catholic church on one side and a Syrian Christian church on the other. "Hindu temple as well," he shrugged. St Thomas the Apostle came to Kerala in AD70. Arundhati Roy puts it more poetically: "Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag." There's still one tiny functioning Jewish synagogue, Paradesi in Fort Cochin, founded in 1568 by Spanish and Dutch Sephardic Jews, which can be visited for a small fee and has been preserved by the World Monuments Fund.

I have visited India more than 30 times. It's an obsession, a continuing quest. I dream sometimes of Kerala and wake with a start, imagining my bed is being rocked like a cradle as Mohamed tips our boat, reaching for overhanging bananas. There's a fretwork of palm fronds shimmering through smeared glass, my little window to a simpler world.

MORE TO THE STORY

Cruise Abercrombie & Kent has a nine-day tour of Kerala in its Private Journeys portfolio that includes backwater cruising; from \$3265 a person. Avoid the monsoon months of July and August due to patterns of severe seasonal floods the past two years.

■ abercrombiekent.com.au

Eat Chef Nimmy runs cooking classes at her 1940s family bungalow in Kochi.

Learn how to make the likes of idli rice cakes, served with coconut chutney packed with green chilli, onion and ginger. Her husband Paul is a source of great insider information on Kerala.

■ nimmypaul.com

Stay The CGH Earth group's properties display "minimal interference with nature or the local environment, without compromising on luxury". Try its Coconut Lagoon by Lake Vembanad in Kumarakom, where a ferry deposits guests at reception and cows graze beside heritage bungalows, and sister property Brunton Boatyard in Fort Cochin, the historic quarter of Kochi. Also charming is nearby Malabar House, with 17 rooms and a courtyard restaurant open to non-guests. All offer Ayurvedic spas for traditional healing treatments.

■ cghearth.com

■ malabarhouse.com

Shop Think small and give Lulu, India's largest shopping mall, a wide berth. Fair-trade chain Fabindia is a fine source of clothing, block-printed textiles, and village-made homewares. If tailoring is required, stop by Angel Cotton Collections in Princess Street and hope that trusty seamstress Ruby is at her ancient Singer sewing machine. Ethnic Passage sells handmade paper and objets d'art; the shop leads through to Cafe Jew Town, a good spot to pause before exploring the antiques stores of the Jewish quarter.

■ fabindia.com





Houseboat on Kerala backwaters, main; making coir rope, above; Alappuzha waterway, left; transporting crops on Lake Vembanad, top right