

Kerala: Sun, sea, holistic treatments and culture

By: Karen Dabrowska

In Kerala meals are served on banana leaf plates. At the end of the meal you can signify your level of satisfaction by dragging the bottom end of the leaf on to the top to indicate the meal was good. If you fold the leaf from top to bottom you are not happy. But tourists are seldom disappointed with the cuisine, which is as varied as the south Indian state itself.



The local delicacy is karimeen mappas, deep fried fresh water fish with spices washed down with a fresh toddy beer, delicious and sweet. Appam, a rice pancake with a fluffy centre eaten with vegetable or mutton stew is another local delicacy.

Famous for its backwaters, a paradise of tropical greenery among the rice fields and coconut plantations and traditional Ayurvedic treatments, Kerala is also a state of Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Jewish places of

worship and pilgrimage. An occasional tiger makes an appearance in the wildlife sanctuaries. Kerala is the home of Kairipayattu, the source of martial arts. Artistic woodwork is another attraction. There are fascinating village walks and visits to spice and rubber plantations and coir factories which make mats and handicrafts from coconut husks. The snake boat race, in which scores of long snake boats and smaller craft take part is the largest team sport in the world held in conjunction with Onam, the





harvest festival in August/September.

An ideal holiday combines Ayurvedic treatments with sightseeing and boat rides on the canals which have earned Kerala the sobriety of Venice of the East. Batu from Goa, who spent most of his life in Africa, embarked on a Kerala adventure in Kumarakom's Eastend Lakesong resort with a professional Ayurvedic treatment centre.

Familiar with Westernised Goa,

largely due to its Portuguese influence from colonial days, Batu described Kerala as a very different and unusual holiday destination where the local culture is vibrant and unique.

"At the airport the immigration procedures are slow – your bags come out faster than you. You walk out of the airport and buy your mobile connection from the little enterprising kiosk. Just sign the form, they fill out the blanks. A copy of your id is required and they photograph your passport with a

digital camera. You can load the sim with as little as five rupees. The sim is activated and you are ready to go. All in the space of five minutes”.

He arrived at 5am on a summer morning in April so the roads were fairly quiet and the air conditioned car was a welcome relief to the outside temperature of 30+. There is winter in Kerala but the temperatures don't drop much.

“Once we were off the highway the rural roads were narrow and

winding, hazy in the morning mist. You got the aromatic smells of the cashew nut husks being burned. All the houses are built very close to the road which snakes across the landscape. There is lush green everywhere and as the dawn breaks the canals and the backwaters of Kumarakom appear. As far as the eye can see there are vast paddy fields stretching into the distance dotted with coconut palms. The roads are so narrow that the drivers honk continuously to alert oncoming traffic”.





The Eastend Lakesong resort, caters for upmarket tourists in luxury and seclusion. Vali, a mythical dragon, guardian of the complex carved standing on a elephant to signify its strength, greets visitors. The buildings were constructed by traditional craftsmen to ensure a serene atmosphere in harmony with nature.

Batu opted for five days of Ayurvedic treatments. Ayurveda means science of life. It describes

an approach to health where the whole person is treated according to the precepts laid out in 114 hymns or formulations for the treatment of disease recorded around 1,500 BC in the Vedas, ancient books of Indian wisdom.

"The Lakesong clinic is very professionally run. The doctor, a highly intuitive individual, starts with a consultation outlining the principles of Ayurveda and assesses you and the problems you are likely to have. He told me I had sluggish digestion which

occurs once you pass 50 and that I was a bit stressed and prone to skin infections”.

Batu's treatment consisted of several rejuvenation massages which left him feeling very much awake, alive and (full of beans) yet absolutely relaxed. He was also given a facial and a treatment where oil is poured on the forehead where the third eye is located. This can release emotional traumas buried in the subconscious and some patients cry as they bring up repressed memories.

Altered states of consciousness can also be induced but officially the clinic 'doesn't do mysticism'.

In Kerala different faiths co-exist in a happy symbiosis. The open-mindedness and tolerance of the locals is exemplified in Vaikom on the eastern banks of Vembanad Lake with the ancient Mahadeva Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. Hindus of all castes insisted the temple be open to the lower castes and their agitation led to the historic Temple Entry proclamation of 1936. During the Ashtami





festival held annually in November/ December there are elephant processions, religious discourses and traditional dance and music performances.

There are a number of well known mosques in Kerala, The Vavar mosque at Erumely, the mosque at Erattupetta, The Pazhava-palli and Puthurpallii mosques in Changanacherry and the mosque



at Thazhathangadi built by Malik Dinar 1,000 years ago.

Kashmir is famous for its houseboats but Kerala also offers visitors luxurious houseboats converted from traditional rice boats which sail through the backwaters and are available for an overnight cruise.

At Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary visitors are greeted by thousands of migratory birds, some from the Himalayas and some from as far away as Siberia. There are also

native kingfishers ablaze in psychedelic colours. The main attractions are local birds like the waterfowl, cuckoo owl, egret, heron and water duck not to mention over 200 different fresh water fish.

After a happy time at Lakesong Batu took a taxi to the 13 acre Abad Turtle Beach resort at Maraikulam a sleepy fishing village with the white sandy Marai Beach.

He was extremely impressed with





the rooms in the beach cottage.

«Everything was air conditioned». It was here that he captured orbs, circles of energy, on his digital camera. «You can see them in the night. It's a wonderful, surreal, visual experience». There was also a rickshaw ride through the countryside with a magical sunset in the background and memorable evenings spent in the little restaurants serving authentic Kerala dishes.

But a London photo exhibition by Tourism Concern show cased another aspect of life in Allepy district which houses the beach resort: the displacement of fishermen to make way for tourist complexes.

After the tsunami five years ago the people of India's south coast face the threat of displacement from their land, loss of livelihoods, environmental degradation and alienation from traditional ways of

life. Despite massive aid-flows to the region, many families are still waiting for their tsunami-damaged homes to be rebuilt. Others endure cramped and undignified living conditions in re-settlement camps while the funds that were meant to assist them are channelled instead into beach front beautification schemes for tourists. Many locals are being pressured to sell their sea front houses to developers. Turtle Bay opened 14 months and the landscaping is not complete.

Batu saw the fishermen of Allepy

go out in flat boats wrapped in white fibre glass bags. The nets were laid in the evening and raised in the early hours of the morning. Whole families happily plucked the fish and prawns from the nets. The fish are were then sold.

The Abad Plaza in Cochin was the last stop. «I had to catch a flight home out of Cochin so I spent a day and a half there», Batu explained. «The place was teeming with life and the traffic was absolutely horrendous. Zebra crossings were mere decorations





and you used them at your peril as the traffic hurtles past as if pedestrians didn't exist. Cochin is a shoppers paradise. There were saris, sweet meats, gold, jewellery - you name it, you can get it. It was a lovely experience».

For Batu the most memorable aspect of his trip was the boundless wealth of cultural richness and the refrain extended wherever he travelled: welcome, welcome, welcome from the sincere hearts of the local people.