

# Kerala

## A heaven with forbidden fruit

Report and photos by: DOMINICK A. MERLE

KERALA, India--- This is preposterous. Just a few moments ago we were wide-eyed in terror on a highway free-for-all, narrowly missing a series of head-on collisions with trucks, buses, motorized rickshaws, pedestrians and cows. Now, less than 100 meters away, we are on a houseboat in what seems to be a gigantic Garden of Eden, complete with its own forbidden fruit.

Whereas the din on the highway was an assault on our senses, we somehow are now mystically soundproofed, save for the chirping of a few tropical birds.

This is Kerala State at the southern tip of India, where the waters of the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal intermingle, the last stop in this fascinating land and its newest tourist frontier.

It was here, along the Malabar Coast, where King Solomon's ships are said to have sailed a thousand years before Christ.

As we approached the airport at the capital city of Trivandrum, it appeared that a lush tropical forest stretched as far as one could see. But it was an illusion; below the palms were cities, towns and villages virtually bumping into one another.

Kerala is one of the smallest states in India, about one-tenth the size

of California, but it is India's most densely populated region with more than 30 million people—that's roughly the population of Canada.

And while we were on that thrill-a-second highway ride, it seemed that all 30 million were out there vying for a piece of the road, usually the middle.

Overloaded buses were tilting like boats ready to capsize. Even cows, goats and riderless horses that nosed into the madness looked terrified.

But now, gliding along the backwaters on our houseboat,

time seems to stand still. The backwaters are comprised of a sprawling system of saltwater and freshwater creeks, lagoons, huge lakes and rivers that provide 1,000 miles of inland waterway between the ports of Quilon and Cochin.

Boats are the only means of transportation for the inhabitants of the backwaters, and for some villagers a western face is rare.

The forbidden fruit in this lush tropical garden looks like a cross between an apple and a pear and dangles temptingly from tree branches near the water. It is called

"suicide fruit" by the locals, and it can be deadly without medical attention. Children are schooled on ➤



شباك الصيد الصينية الهائلة في كوشين.

Giant Chinese fishing nets in Cochin



Typical houseboat on the backwaters

نموذج مثالي من المراكب المستخدمة في المياه الخلفية.



**The forbidden fruit in this lush tropical garden looks like a cross between an apple and a pear and dangles temptingly from tree branches near the water. It is called "suicide fruit" by the locals, and it can be deadly without medical attention. Children are schooled on this danger as soon as they learn to crawl.**

this danger as soon as they learn to crawl. The hull of our houseboat was built more than 50 years ago, but not for tourism. She was one of the 5,000 "kettuvallams," or rice barges, when the backwaters were Kerala's main commercial transport system. At 75 feet long and made of the dense wood of the jackfruit tree, the barge would carry 42 tons of cargo and was poled along by wiry and surprisingly strong Keralites. But expanding roadways threatened to sound the death knell for the kettuvallams, and by the early 1990s, only 100 remained of the once 5,000-strong fleet. A number of area businessmen were not about to have this tradition fade into history. One of them was Babu Varghese, operator of a travel agency called Tourindia. He had a dream of converting the rice barges into

tourist boats and now the agency has a dozen luxury houseboats on the waters. Other tour operators took to the waters and it is now a thriving industry. Our houseboat, the Surya (Sun God), was a double decker with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a sitting room and a kitchen on the first level, and a sun deck and dining area above. There were also two-by-four-foot "balconies" that could be lowered on each side of the hull, enough room to put two deck chairs on each. Sitting out there felt like riding on a magic carpet just skimming the water. My wife Susan and I were welcomed aboard by Roy, our guide, who introduced us to Gagavan, our captain; Raju, the engineer, and Mohan, the chef. After being poled away from shore, the outboard motor started—

there was a lot to see and poling is slow business and we were off on our three-day tour of the backwaters. The most picturesque part of our voyage was along the narrow canals where villagers were engaged in a myriad of daily functions...a young boy fishing from the bank...giggling schoolgirls arriving home by boat...goods being unloaded at a general store...women washing pots and pans in the water. We'd dock twice daily at tiny villages where Mohan the chef would buy fresh fish and produce, and we'd get a chance to stretch our sea legs. Once back aboard, Mohan would retreat into his tiny kitchen and soon the aroma of coconut-flavored curries would drift throughout the houseboat. At breakfast and dinner, we used plates and utensils, but at lunchtime we ➤



Typical traffic jam in Kerala.

إزدحام معتاد في كيرالا.

plucked the food with our fingers of huge banana leaves.

Our guide Roy gave us a key tip. "Use three fingers and your thumb to bring it to your mouth," he said while demonstrating, "and then use the back of your thumb to shovel it in." With a little practice, our thumbs were nearly mechanized.

Our cabins had hatches opening outward and we slept within inches of the water. There was no need for an alarm clock. At precisely 5 a.m. each day, the Hindu priest of the village calls everyone to prayer via giant speakers tucked into the palm trees. We sailed through Lake Astamude watching fishermen dredging up mussels and shrimp and tiger prawns by hand. And at Astamude we saw the most compelling foreign image of Kerala—Chinese fishing nets looking like giant sinister birds, dipping into the water and bringing up prawns at night, with spotlights blazing like dragons' eyes.

The nets are the same type as those constructed centuries ago when the Chinese first came to Kerala.

Finishing our boat tour, we returned to our wild highway adventure for the drive back to Trivandrum. But we were old pros now; barely missing collisions by inches seemed like a Sunday drive, and we had complete faith in our unflappable driver.

Or perhaps we were still under the hypnotic spell of the backwaters.

The name Kerala translates to "Land of Coconuts," the major industry. Every scrap of the coconut tree is used to make something or another and the coconuts and oils themselves are used in cooking and in soaps, cosmetics and facial creams. Not one drop is wasted.

Kerala has the highest literacy rate in all of India and is home to India's first bonafide middle class. Unlike most other parts of this nation, there is little excessive wealth here, and also little abject poverty.

Since there are few industries, pollution is also mild, and the three major religions---Hindu, Muslim and Christianity---co-exist harmoniously for the most part.

If this is beginning to sound a bit too much like Camelot, perish the thought. This is still India, and a number of safeguards are called for, as are outlined in the accompanying information box.

But even the political parties seem downright friendly. Kerala is one of the few places that spasmodically elects a Communist government, although it's more like a "Communist Light" as the goals usually coincide with the opposition.

Must be something in the coconuts.

(Dominick Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food & Travel Writers Assn.)

## IF YOU GO:

Visas are required. Check with your travel agent or nearest Indian Consulate or High Commission of India.

The best time to visit is between October and May. Other months are rainy. Bring light clothing and some type of headgear

Drink bottled water only, and don't forget to check the seal.

Avoid purchasing food that has been laid out in open markets.

Men should not carry large amounts of cash in traditional back-pockets wallets; women should not keep valuables in easy-to-snatch purses. Hidden moneybelts are safer.

While taxis are plentiful, negotiate the fare before heading out as many vehicles are not metered. It's also wiser to arrange for cabs at your hotel rather than hailing one on a city street.

Service charges are usually included in restaurants; additional tipping is not required but appreciated.

Outward displays of affection on city streets or public areas are frowned upon by Keralites.

For further information on Kerala, try the website [keralatourism.org](http://keralatourism.org). The site also contains information about renting a houseboat. To find out more about the Surya houseboat described in this article, try the website [tourindiakerala.com](http://tourindiakerala.com) ■