



CRUISING THE BACKWATERS IN STYLE

A weekend of floating along Kerala's backwaters is the perfect antidote to city-induced stress.

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One of the comfortable houseboats

Sailing Destinations/Kerala

We awoke to a dream-reality: the gentle roll of water under us; the tolling of church bells and a clutch of coconut trees gliding past the window. It took us a while to realize that we were adrift on a houseboat as it gently cruised down the enchanted backwaters of Kerala, a vibrant, 1500-kilometre network of canals, estuaries and lakes that lace a land flushed green with vegetation.

We tumbled out of bed and padded down to the lounge area at the front of our cruise boat which could best be described as a luxury yacht gone native. And as the first rays of the sun kissed the thatched roof of the vessel, we sipped hot tea served by the houseboat's ever-attentive crew.

Along the banks, the tumble of everyday life — simple, uncomplicated and fascinating — started to unravel. Women washed utensils and kept a watchful eye on the young lads who splashed about in the water. Men paddled by in carved-out canoes laden with rich harvests of bananas and coconuts. A buffalo mooed as it was

A tourist cruise boat follows a houseboat



ferried across the waters. Large spider-like Chinese fishing nets strained the water for its bounty. Fishermen cast their nets with the grace of dancers. Toddy tappers scaled palm trees to collect pots laden with potent sap.

The morning melted into day and we retreated to our bedroom to freshen up in an attached bathroom fitted with all the modern amenities. Indeed, the houseboat was an ingenious work of fusion engineering in which craftsmen

had grafted a bedroom with most modern hotel facilities (including air-conditioning) onto a traditional rice boat that once ferried cargo across the waterways.

Leisure yacht; Indian style!

The transformation of these old craft,

known as *kettuvaloms* in Malayalam, into pleasure boats changed the way tourists started to experience the backwaters. When we first sailed on one of these houseboats in the early 1990s, they were as much a curiosity to the locals, who would stop, stare and wave, as their lifestyle was to tourists. Today

these craft are part of the scenery; a colourful addition to the saga of the waterway. Indeed, they come in all sizes and shapes ranging from one- to five-bedroom affairs, many sporting upper-level balconies, terraces and architectural indulgences.

Despite the diversity of styles,

A lunch spread



Fantastic views all around



Sailing Destinations/Kerala



The helmsman aboard a houseboat

most conform to a basic design of a rustic superstructure comprising a combination of bamboo, thatch, coir and cane riding upon a black canoe-like base that can best be explained by the craft's Malayalam name: *Kettu* (tied) *vallom* (boat) or a boat made of wooden planks stitched or tied together with coir rope.

The boats are classified by the tonnage (*pathive* in Malayalam) that they can carry and can range from 15 tons to 40 tons. The Spice Coast Cruises houseboat that we sailed on was a 20-ton *kettuvallom* that was 53 feet long, 10 feet wide and 4 feet high. Grafted onto it was a one-bedroom suite that included a lounge and sun deck at the front, and a galley at the rear. The cruise company also sails two-bedroom, 40-ton *kettuvalloms* that measure 75 feet by 11 feet by 5 feet. The two types of craft use 15 Hp and 25 Hp outboard engines respectively, and have a cruising speed of 11 knots.



A traditional meal

There was a time, when these old war horses of the waterways were powered by punting poles and patchwork sails, and they served as a crucial link in the economy of the region. Before the introduction of road and rail transport, the backwaters were the main arteries of the region and these rice boats ferried rich booty — ivory, gold, silver, silk, rubber and spices — to the port city of Cochin from where they were shipped to the rest of the

known world. In fact, the backwaters played a crucial part in the discovery of the New World, for it was in their quest for an alternative route to this land of plenty that the Europeans stumbled upon America.

Backwaters today

Centuries later, visitors still seek out this ancient land, only now the backwaters and the houseboats are the

attraction. We had set sail the previous day on our floating one-suite resort from the banks of Vembanad lake, some 50 kilometres from Cochin. Our crew comprised three hands who multi-tasked as helmsman, housekeeper, waiter, chef and guide. As we pushed off from a quiet little jetty on a still lake, our 'captain' unfurled a rainbow-coloured umbrella to protect himself from the sun.

We sailed across the lake, hemmed in by rice fields that were studded with little hamlets. The banks were covered with a virtual riot of vegetation; a canvas daubed with every conceivable shade of green. The houseboat pulled up along an embankment where we were served a delicious meal of freshwater fish fried to a crisp, and local cuisine prepared with generous helpings of coconut in the little galley at the rear end of the boat.

Timeless paradise

Following an afternoon nap, we set sail for the backwater town of Alleppey, a lush and mysterious world that seemed untouched by time. The sight of a police patrol boat and a white ambulance rushing by to answer an emergency call drove home the point that this world was very real. Schools and churches fringed the waterway, a thatched hut housed the State Bank of India, patchwork sails of rice boats ballooned in the wind, while the large Chinese fishing nets strained the waters. Indeed, life along the backwaters meshed comfortably with unchanging tradition. At one point we hopped off the boat and took a leisurely stroll through a little village.

That evening, we anchored in the middle of Vembanad Lake. Nursing tall drinks, we watched the sky ignite in fiery colours as the sun slipped behind

the far horizon. The world around us was hushed except for the gentle lapping of water against the hull of the boat and the tolling of church bells riding the wind.

That night we slept like babies and the next morning we reclaimed paradise as it un-scrolled across the backwaters in a bright new avatar. **IB**

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Fact File

The backwaters of Kerala stretch from Cochin all the way down to Quilon. The more popular tourist areas are Alleppey and Vembanad Lake around Kumarakom. There are smaller backwaters at Kovalam outside Thiruvananthapuram in the south and Calicut in the north.

A fiery sunset

