

ADRIFT IN KOCHI

Cruising South India's calming backwaters

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We were bound for a sunset cruise on the backwaters around the port city of Kochi in the southern Indian state of Kerala when the outboard motor of the boat spluttered and died. The captain flashed a brilliant smile and apologised for the delay. “Water hyacinth has snared the prop,” he explained as he hiked up his lungi (an ankle-length wraparound) and plunged into the water to battle with the offending weed. Soon freed, we pulled away and the pillared-one-storey stately palace of the Rajas of Cochin melted away behind banks of foliage and blossoms. As if on cue, the boat’s steward served us high tea: flasks of tea and coffee, a jug of freshly squeezed orange juice, sandwiches and crisp samosas.

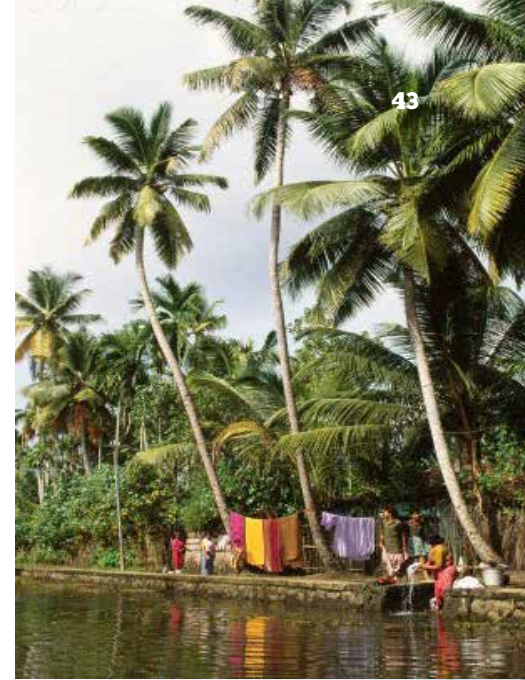
The area in south India that includes Kochi, Alappuzha, Quilon (previously known Cochin, Alleppey and Kollam respectively), Kottayam and Kumarakom has 1,500 sq km of beautiful lakes, lagoons and canals that serve as the highways and byways of the communities along their banks. The area bubbles with history and was the centre of India’s spice trade. During the 14th and 15th centuries, *kettuvalloms*, or cargo boats, laden with ivory, gold and silver, silk, tea, rubber and spices sailed from the port city of Kochi to the rest of the world. “Kerala is the Venice of the East,” we were told so many times that we almost began to believe it.

Today, the backwaters (as they are known) are a unique travel experience serving up a multi-layered kaleidoscope of beautiful landscapes, heritage architecture and cultural delights. The best way to explore is by boat and options range from luxury cruises such as the Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda to basic public ferries, which are best for meeting locals.

On one public ferry between Allappuzha and Kottayam, we sat next to the former mayor of Kochi who, brimming with pride, told us that Kerala’s backwaters were behind Europe’s discovery of the New World. “They were searching for an alternative sea route to Kochi and they stumbled on the Americas,” he said. (Indeed, it wasn’t until 1502 that Vasco Da Gamma sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and arrived in Kochi).

The next day, we boarded a comfortable houseboat near Kochi for a multi-day cruise. When we first sailed on these houseboats some 20 years ago, they were as much a curiosity to the locals as their lifestyle was to tourists. Today the luxury yachts are part of the scenery and a colourful addition to the saga of the waterway. Regardless of their size, they conform to a basic design: a canopy of cane and, rattan riding upon a black canoe-like base that can best be explained by its local name: *Kettu* (tied) *vallom* (boat) or a boat made of wooden planks stitched or tied together with coir rope.

That sunny morning, we sailed across Vembanad Lake lined with picturesque resorts, and through canals hemmed in tightly by rice fields and little hamlets. As we relaxed in the lounge, the banks un-scrolled in front of us, often buried under a riot of vegetation – a canvas daubed with every conceivable shade of green. >>



(From top and left) Local colour on the Kerala backwaters

Luxury houseboats and fine food make for a perfect family getaway

Choose to cruise by deluxe houseboat, launch or local ferry



Houseboats have become part of the landscape around Kochi



Local cuisine inspired by a hybrid of cultures

We pulled along an embankment where we were served an exquisite lunch of fried freshwater fish served with generous helpings of coconut.

After an afternoon nap, we set sail for the backwater town of Allappuzha, a lush and mysterious town that seemed untouched by time. Schools and churches fringed the waterway, a thatched hut housed the State Bank of India, the patchwork sails of rice boats ballooned in the wind. Indeed, life along the backwaters meshed comfortably with unchanging tradition.

That evening, we anchored on Vembanad Lake. Nursing tall drinks in the lounge, 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 and the tolling of church bells far off in the distance.

The following morning we moored in Kochi, a colourful port city that over the centuries was caught in colonial ping-pong match changing hands between the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the city was a base for Arab, Jewish and Chinese traders. A colourful cocktail of legacies of the past – a Jewish synagogue, Chinese fishing nets, Portuguese churches, the Dutch Palace and the British-style cricket green or maidan – are crammed into the five-sq-km area of historic Fort Kochi and the adjacent city of Mattancherry.

In the fort area, we watched a candelabra-lit wedding service at the St Francis Church, the oldest European church in India, dating from 1503. We were soon joined by a formal-looking gentleman in a tatty suit and feared we would be admonished for taking photographs. Instead, he leaned over and in a conspiratorial whisper asked: “Could you spare me a pen?”

One pen shy from our stationery arsenal, we walked on to what is reportedly the oldest Jewish synagogue in India. We circled the central gilded altar stacked with prayer shawls and holy books and gazed up at the cluster of beautiful chandeliers and colourful glass lamps that draped down from the ceiling. The synagogue built in 1568 is still used the small Jewish community in the city.

Getting around the backwaters

1

Houseboats

Undoubtedly, this is the most luxurious and exotic way of exploring the backwaters. These boats are fitted with the essential mod cons and include on-board kitchenettes.

2

Motorboats

These are ideal for exploring the network of narrow canals that snake through the settlements along the waterfront: Alleppey and Kottayam in particular.

3

Ferry Boats

Capture the true flavour of the backwaters by travelling as the locals do in ferry boats that make numerous stops along the way, picking up and dropping off passengers. On the plus side, these are surprisingly cheap.



Boats cruise through canals hemmed in by towering palms



Resorts up and down the coast offer secluded five-star luxury

Nearby are the two narrow streets lined with antique shops that exude the colour, noise and hard sell of an oriental bazaar. Kathakali dance masks, furniture, lamps and an assortment of curios spill onto the streets in an attempt to lure buyers into the dark attic-like interiors which are stuffed with the treasures of a discarded past. Here you will find beautiful and elaborately carved furniture, doors, jewellery boxes, Chinese vases, chandeliers and lanterns, Venetian glass rose water sprinklers, exotic candlesticks and icons.

Nearby is Mattancherry Palace built by the Portuguese around 1557 and presented to Raja Veera Kerala Varma of Kochi as a goodwill gesture. It was later renovated by the Dutch and gained the misnomer 'Dutch Palace'. The waterway across from the palace buzzed with ferries, cargo boats and traditional crafts that cruised past large cargo ships that idled in the harbour.

On the way to the airport the next afternoon, we were accosted by a young boy who plied us with silver trinkets. Unfortunately, he could not sell us the things that we wanted to take home as souvenirs – a fiery sunset, the sight of dolphins leaping outside our bedroom window and the dancing rays of an early morning sun. ■

Essential Kochi

Stay

Malabar House is a charming boutique heritage hotel in the centre of Fort Kochi. Parade Rd, Fort Kochi
Tel+ 91-484 221 6666
malabarhouse.com

See

The historic district of Fort Kochi from Chinese fishing nets to Dutch houses, Portuguese churches and English trading company buildings.

Shop

Kasavu Kada, Kochi's best-known handloom enterprise, has been in the same family for three generations. Church Landing Road, Kochi
Tel +91 484 237 3110
kasavukadaonline.com

Dine

The Rice Boat is Kochi's coolest dining option for local cuisine. Try white snapper in banana leaf. Vivanta by Taj – Malabar, Willingdon Island, Kochi
Tel +91 484 664 3000
vivantabytaj.com

The History Café in Brunton Boatyard, creates Malayali cuisine inspired by Dutch, Portuguese, Syrians and Jewish dishes. 1/498, Fort Kochi, Kochi
Tel +91 484 221 5461
cghearth.com

Web

Download Kerala Kitchen at the iTunes App Store for a guide to cooking authentic Kerala dishes, and visit kochitravelguide.com for staying and sightseeing in Kochi.



Malaysia Airlines operates daily direct flights from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Cochin International Airport (COK)