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Kerala Cruising India's Coconut Coast

If you like places with lush tropical landscapes, colorful characters, delicious cuisine and a rich spiritual heritage – Kerala will not disappoint. As Caroline discovers, this sliver of green on India's southwest coast offers the perfect setting to renew your soul and nourish your senses.

Having traveled the width and breadth of India there's one place that draws me back time and again- Kerala. Within this 580 km stretch of coast lies a diverse landscape ranging from coconut fringed beaches, wildlife reserves, mountain spice plantations and a maze of soothing backwaters. Add to this people who are as warm and 'balmy' as the tropical weather and you have a very interesting holiday destination.

My first uncertain visit to Kerala remains fresh in my memory... "If I don't get a break I'm going to break down." I moaned. Six months of Calcutta chaos had left me drained and depressed. The heart rendering poverty, constant haggling and heavy exhaust fumes were suffocating. I was gradually joining the ranks of the sickly and downtrodden whom I was there to help.

"Take a breather on a Kerala beach". Came my friend's suggestion. I was thinking more of Tahiti. "You'll love Kerala. It is much mellower than the rest of India." She coaxed (eager to rid herself of my winging presence.)

Well it would be cheaper than Tahiti, I calculated. Though skeptical, I'd heard good things about Kerala. Those who live there justifiably love to toot their own horns. With an impressive health, education and welfare record that far surpasses the rest of India, it is almost a different country. Kerala boasts the India's lowest birthrate, lowest infant mortality, highest marriage age and a dubious 100% literacy rate. However – good statistics don't guarantee a good holiday spot. Only trial by travel would reveal whether Kerala really was "God's own country" as promoted in the glossy travel brochures.

Departing from Calcutta's aptly named 'Dum Dum' airport I was primed for anything. So relieved on alighting from the shaky Indian airline flight in Trivandrum, I had to resist the urge to give the tarmac a grateful Pope style kiss. Kerala's capital Trivandrum is now referred to as its pre-British unpronounceable name –Thiruvananthapuram (Try saying that ten times!). I was happy to see that Trivandrum's airport was relatively less disorganized than other Indian airports though still a far cry from the septic moving walkway world of western airports like Singapore. In many ways India is like a parallel universe. 'Developed' western countries may meet superficial needs superbly yet suffer deeply from a crumbling moral and social foundation. Whereas though India's superficial foundations are very shaky, their moral and social backbone is incredibly strong. In some ways Kerala has the best of both worlds while still bearing that distinctly Indian 'conspicuous absence of common sense' as a friend terms it. Searching for the sense behind the nonsensical expect the word 'why' to crop up often.

Why are the three officials crammed into a tiny booth unconvinced that my short hair passport photo matches my current longhaired disheveled Kali-look? Why have I been given a ticket to a non-existent counter? Why is the security guard motioning with his WWI rifle for me to shift from the moving baggage carousel to one that's not operating? Why are the currency exchange outlets having a bidding war to give me the best rate whilst standing under a 'fixed rate' sign?

Ahh... the eternal mysteries of India. This quirkiness can be at once disarmingly hysterical and exasperating. The way you respond to these inevitable incidents can make or break your Indian odyssey. I find it helps to humor your way through, go with the flow and keep it all in perspective whilst dodging the archaic bureaucratic systems by feigning ignorance whenever possible.

With a little patience, tolerance and humility, one can dig through India's dirt to uncover hidden gold. The temporary hardships faced become inconsequential on discovering the wealth of human spirit and wisdom that makes visiting India such an enriching experience. Alternatively you can react as the man behind me did. Contracting an acute case of Sahib's disease, his symptoms were unmistakable. Red faced from yelling, rolling his eyes condescendingly and pointing out the relative inferiority of everything Indian to everything western – he was doing an uncanny impression of the Major in "The Jewel in the Crown." This hypertensive effort to incite efficiency simply made things worse. Met with a barrier of resentful resistance the officials delighted in escalating his frustrations by employing the passive aggressive techniques that toppled the British Empire. Karma can bite back quickly in India and as writer Ruth Prawer Jhabvala said ...it does so by finding your weakest spot and pressing on it!

Though rough and rude at times I found that Keralites generally make an effort to extend sincere hospitality to friendly foreigners. Albeit the Hindu ethic of 'treating the guest as god' would be an overstatement, Keralites have a long history of playing host to visitors. Over centuries spice traders from Portugal, Holland, France, Italy, China and England came there to access coffee, cardamom, cashews, coconut, cloves and pepper. In return they left their cultural mark still evident in the Chinese fishing nets, Roman Catholic churches, Synagogues and Communist leanings. But as I left the airport I had set my sites on much more profound interests, namely shopping, eating and vegetating. Feeling like an ambassador memsahib in the antiquated ambassador taxi we bumped and honked through Trivandrum's wide streets. Through the sepia tinged light a bull with coloured horns crossed our path. "Auspicious omen" smiled the driver as he swerved. "Lucky Bull" I sighed with relief. I found getting from A to B on Kerala's pot-holed roads quite wearing. Negotiating the oncoming traffic, sharp turns and narrow country roads all to the constant blaring of horns is not for the faint hearted. Even atheists may find themselves making a desperate plea to the bobbing Ganesh on the dashboard, experiencing born-again faith in miracles on reaching their destination. There's so much to do and see in Kerala but to avoid travel frazzle select a few special spots rather than exhausting yourself by trying to see everything in a short time. Train travel wherever possible is much easier on the nerves and gluts. It is wonderful to stand at the open door as the lush green villages pass, atmospheric music such as Sheila Chandra streaming through your walkman.

Every place has a distinct aroma. Entering Trivandrum a heady scent of jasmine and coconut oil enveloped me – a combination designed to keep one cool headed in weather that can quickly drive one troppo. Booking into a bland and basic hotel typical of cities in Kerala, the action packed city beckoned. Though I'm with Gandhi when he said the real India is to be found in the timeless villages, the cities have their high points, especially if you like to shop 'til you drop. Spiritual searching aside, the experience of India's bargain shopping can awaken the avaricious materialist in even the most confirmed renunciate. After all, enlightenment doesn't come cheap but everything else does! Anyway, as far as religious experiences go, the closest thing to heaven for me is visiting one of Trivandrum's palatial multistory fabric emporiums. Playing Maharani for a day I love to drape myself in a swirling fantasia of endless colours and fabrics. Entering as a black and white, bedraggled pigeon I emerge as a flamboyant peacock, barely conspicuous on India's colourful streets. At a ridiculously low price you can buy fabrics and get them made into anything within days. Alternatively the ready-made women's salwar-kameez (pants and top set) and sari or the men's Kurta (shirt), dhoti (sarong) and punjabi (shirt and trouser set) are cool, comfortable and stylish in a Jemima/Imran Khan way. Walking to a nearby restaurant to satisfy my other appetite, a schoolboy with a toothpaste commercial smile stopped me. "How do you like our Indian dress, madam?" oblivious to the irony that he was suited up in a very Western style uniform... "What is your native, madam?" was his next quaint enquiry. This unbridled curiosity about foreigners draws out the social animal in even the most introverted tourist. You find yourself engaged in conversations in the most unexpected places. Most Keralites have very proficient English and love to practice it with favorite topics such as cricket, world politics, philosophy and any personal tidbits you're prepared to share. Often I'm surprised by the scope of knowledge the average Keralite has. Since more Keralites live outside of Kerala than within it's boundaries and considering the high standard of education, their intellect often put me to shame. A fellow passenger once engaged me in a spontaneous debate on the relative merits of Shakespeare and Thoreau. Needless to say this accountant from Cochin had much more to shave on the topic than myself.

Back to Kerala's culinary delights. The only dilemma in Trivandrum is that there are so many restaurants, so little time. As the closest thing to pure Ayurvedic cuisine in India, the traditional Kerala diet is very healthy. Just ask them to go easy on the oil and chilli as that is what often causes 'runny tummy'. One thing you can't avoid is coconut. Keralites love it, adding its flesh and milk to practically every dish. A typical meal, known as a Thali, consists of 3 mild vegetable curries, rice, pappadams, pickle, dal, yogurt, sweet vermicelli and a buttermilk curry leaf drink to aid digestion. It is a vegetarian's paradise and all for around \$3 Australian. Other specialties to tantalise your taste buds include the savory dosa pancake, idli rice dumplings, avial coconut curry and sweet rice payasam. So don't be surprised if you go home carrying a little excess bodily baggage.

After a day in the city I was ready to hit the beach. Kovalam is a popular seaside village only one hour from Trivandrum. Busy during the European holiday season but relatively quiet at other times, it is full of good standard hotels, restaurants and curio shops. The surf is usually clean and gentle but can get wild adding to the slapstick entertainment of watching Indians getting dumped in shin deep water. Prices are a little hiked up but still cheap as per western rates. There are more remote beaches nearby but many limit access to guests staying at the overlooking pricey resorts.

Kovalam is one of the many places you can see traditional Kerala dance and martial arts. Preservation of indigenous culture is a high priority in Kerala in contrast to other areas of India where it is rapidly dying out. The two main dancing styles are Kathakali and Mohiniattan. Performances depict the eternal struggle between good and evil through epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Kathakali is a garishly colourful dance performed by men. No words are spoken but rather the story and characters are conveyed through costumes and elaborate hand gestures known as mudras. Performances can last 24 hours but it is fine to come and go as you please. Mohiniattan literally means the 'dance of the enchantress'. Reserved for female dancers this style is more delicate and subdued than Kathakali.

Kerala's martial art, Kalarippayattu is India's best-kept secret. Believed by historians to be one of the oldest martial arts in the world it is fitting that it thrived in Kerala, home of India's warrior class, the Nairs. The speed, agility and skill of its exponents is astounding. Training for years without weapons, once proficient enough, they learn to use a spear, sword, dagger, stick, shield and deadly vital points called marmas (similar to acupuncture points). They also learn the moral code of Yoga and the healing art of Ayurveda. With muscles shining from oil, jumping meters high, spinning and wielding weapons, a Kalarippayattu display is a memorable spectacle. Seeing these healthy, robust bodies I was inspired to address my withering body's needs. What better place to do this than at an Ayurvedic retreat. No holiday in Kerala is complete without the luxurious pampering offered by Ayurveda, India's ancient healing science. Ayurveda has perfected the art of relaxation, purification and rejuvenation. There are many high quality resorts to choose from but I selected one at Kootanad, near Trichur, which had the isolation and quiet I yearned for. Hibernating in my own private cabin for two weeks I gratefully soaked up the daily herbal oil massages, enemas and internal medicines. Qualified Ayurvedic physicians closely supervise everything and private yoga classes were optional. The silence, solitude and treatments left me feeling serene and revitalized, ready to float on to one of Kerala's waterways.

Dubbed the 'Venice of the East' you could explore Kerala's 48 rivers and over 1,000 canals on a comfortable houseboat. Thousands of miles of backwaters snake from Cochin to Alleppy and back to Cochin. The perfect vehicle to explore these are the traditional houseboats called Kettuvallams. These unique boats are made without nails and span up to 80 feet long. The standard one includes a deck with a day lounge, one to two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen complete with your personal chef. You can get a houseboat from the port of Alleppy through your hotel at the main houseboat areas of Kochi, Kollam, Kottayam and Alleppy.

For just \$40 to \$100 a day you can glide down Kerala's veins, enjoying the pulse of activity in the passing villages. I spent eight days playing Cleopatra down the Nile drifting down the dreamy waterways as the lush riverside canopy cast cooling shadows on my reclining figure, dipping a finger in the rippling water as I lounged on my floating day bed. Occasionally stirring from this relaxed stupor I would lazily motion the driver to set down anchor and stretch my land legs. On land attractions to explore included restaurants, ashrams, impromptu parades, temples and village shops. But I was always keen to get back on board to soak up the setting sun over a cup of sweet milky chai. This is the magic time when temple elephants would take their evening bath or a band of monkeys swung through overhead trees. Dusk chants filled the air and a deep peace settled in my soul.

As the saffron sky silhouetted the riverside landscape against the silvery water I marveled at nature's vibrant canvas. The promotion of this land as 'God's own country' didn't seem so far fetched after all, with God's grace smiling on so many aspects of Kerala life. Despite the madness of "modern progress" in the world Kerala offers a sanctuary that reminds visitors of the value of natural beauty and the sweet simplicity of a spiritually based culture.

Its charm entices me back year after year because fortunately time hasn't made a significant mark on this extraordinary place and its gentle people.

Ayurveda Elements takes annual ayurvedic tours to Kerala.