

**ECO TRAVEL**

**ON A BOAT IN THE BACKWATERS**

Date: March | Edition: National | Page: 48, 48 & 50 | Clip size (cm) W: 57 H: 78



**Eco**travel

*on a Boat  
in the Backwaters*

by **Faizal Khan**  
Alappuzha, Kerala

A National Geographic survey had put the backwaters of Kerala ahead of Taj Mahal on a list of places to see before you die. It is emerging as a nature tourism hot spot of the millennium as it spreads a unique tourist menu before the discriminating tourist and presents a true initiation into eco-tourism.

**I**t is time the dictionaries changed the definition of 'check in'. If they do, they will do well to add 'a houseboat' to the existing 'arrive and register at a hotel or airport'. This was the thought running through my mind as I 'checked into the houseboat' at the Punnamada Jetty in Alappuzha. It was my first day in the town called the 'Venice of the East' for its crisscrossing canals and lakes, after arriving at Kochi airport, 115 km away.

Kerala is a destination that focuses on sustainable and eco-friendly development of tourism. Rich biodiversity, unmatched natural attractions and an equable climate make the state a unique eco-tourism hot spot. In fact, these backwaters are a self-supporting eco system teeming with aquatic life which one can explore only through a boat ride.

The single room houseboat I had booked a week back, was ready to depart from the jetty which was near the starting point of the famous Nehru Trophy snake boat race held every year in August. The staff of the houseboat company untied the thick rope from a wooden stump on the lakeside to free the boat. The vessel slowly moved forward, beginning a journey that I would remember forever.

A large network of canals meander through the town. The backwaters act as a vital waterway for the transport of goods, people and their produce. The total expanse of backwater stretches over 1500 km north to south with a network of 44 rivers, lagoons and lakes. Very often these waterways are the only link between isolated villages and bustling towns. The water is level with the ground. So, you can simply step off the boat and enter your home. This gives a unique opportunity to see village life up close and personal during the leisurely boat ride. And I was, so ready for that.

As the houseboat glided along at its

48 \ March 2012 **ECO**



Tourism in Alappuzha areas is highly ecologically sensitive and sustainable

unhurried pace, the palm fringed narrow canals winding through vast expanses of paddy fields and neat hamlets along the canals were mesmerising and unforgettable. Country boats of various types crisscrossed the path with passengers from all walks of Kerala's rural life. Ducks swimming near the banks and tiny birds flying across the sky, seemed to complete the picture.

Tourism in Alappuzha areas is highly ecologically sensitive and sustainable.

Kerala is geographically located entirely in the Western Ghats. With a protected area of more than 2,300 square km, it has two national parks and 12 wildlife

sanctuaries. Eco-tourism activities in an ecologically sensitive area see to it that local life remains undisturbed. The backwaters ride is as close as one can get to feel the vibrant life in the countryside of god's own country without disturbing it.

Kerala's backwaters, which stretch from Kochi to Kollam and even beyond, have become the face of the state's famed tourism. They draw tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world every year. A few years ago, a National Geographic survey had put the backwaters ahead of Taj Mahal on a list of places to see before you die. It is

emerging as a nature tourism hot spot of the millennium as it spreads a unique tourist menu before a discriminating tourist.

In Alappuzha, the Vembanad Lake is the mainstay of the backwaters. It connects all parts of the Kuttanadu region, the 'rice bowl of Kerala'. This region has the lowest altitude in India, with 500 square kilometres of the region below sea level. Most of the area is covered with water throughout the year. Kuttanadu is one of the few places in the world where farming is carried out below sea level.

The sea water's interface with the rivers



creates a unique ecosystem. Alappuzha's mirror still lagoons and picture book lakesides are rich with marine life and you will be amazed at the profusion of flora and fauna. Waterfowl, cuckoos and owls and at times the migratory Siberian Cranes can be viewed here. Many unique species of aquatic life including crabs, frogs and mudskippers, water birds such as terns, kingfishers, darters, and cormorants, and animals such as otters and turtles live in and alongside backwaters. Palm trees, shrubs, various leafy plants and bushes grow alongside the water bodies providing a green hue to the surrounding landscape.

Alappuzha always had a central place in the trade history of the erstwhile Travancore region of Kerala. In the early days, traders brought their wares to the port city of Alappuzha in 'kettuvallam' or huge wooden boats, rowing them through the backwaters. With the arrival of modern forms of transport, the

'kettuvallam' lost its glory. They were brought back to life in the early 1990s, when the first houseboats were built in Alappuzha from what was left of the 'kettuvallam' to promote eco-tourism that would resurrect the area's economy.

This backwaters tourism presents a unique marriage of ecology and sustainable enterprise. As the tourists began to take to the houseboats, more and more idling 'kettuvallam' were transformed into floating hotels, besides brand new vessels.

This doesn't mean that Alappuzha now deems its water and land as purely commercial. The farmers and fishermen of the area regard nature as sacred. The fishermen here do not allow the big trawlers to fish during monsoons, the reproduction period of fish. The backwaters tour operators, who are mostly locals, are also learning to respect the ecosystem that sustains them.

"What will you have for lunch, sir? Will

the 'Kuttanadu special' be all right for you?" asked Xavier K V, the in-house chef of my houseboat. By the 'Kuttanadu special', Xavier had meant boiled rice and a host of local vegetarian delicacies, with deep fried 'karimeen' (pearl spot). The boat was now far away from mainland Alappuzha and cruising through the interior villages which are nothing but tiny islands in the Vembanad Lake. The still expanse of the lake is a sight to remember, especially if you are sitting on the top deck of the boat.

The boat ride, which extends from the morning until the sunset when the vessel is anchored for the night, is not completely a ride in the backwaters. Guests can wander through the villages on the banks once in a while and even buy fish and vegetables of their choice for dinner. If you are game, you can even cook a local dish, aided by the chef.

Kerala's houseboats today are a far cry from what they used to be a few decades ago. From bare vessels with kerosene lanterns and punting, they now have luxurious though nature friendly bedrooms, baths, CFL bulbs and low noise, low pollution engines. They move along the canals without disturbing the pace of life around them, benefiting the locals who operate them and promoting a way of life that is typical of the region. Guests can rent a houseboat for one night or more and I have heard about tourists who have stayed for weeks simply soaking the verdant surroundings.

As I 'checked out' of the houseboat after a delicious breakfast of 'appam' and chicken stew the next morning, I remembered the famous comments of Mughal emperor Jehangir about Kashmir. "If there is a paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here." Alappuzha certainly qualifies for a similar eulogy. Only, in place of the Himalayas, it's the backwaters and the Arabian sea. ■

