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## PRESS RELEASE

### **American writer bags National Tourism Award for feature on Kerala**

- **Stephanie Pearson's write up 'The Great Heaven', to feature in the upcoming book 'The Best American Travel Writing'**

**Thiruvananthapuram, Aug 2:** An American woman journalist, who wrote an exhilarating account of Kerala — a snapshot on the state's rollicking palm-fringed beaches, gorgeous topography, serene spirituality and hospitality — has won a National Tourism Award.

Ms Stephanie Pearson, based in Santa Fe, won the award for "Best Foreign Journalist for India" for feature write up on Kerala, "The Green Heaven", which appeared in January 2015 issue of the prestigious Outside magazine. The piece, which was based on her experiences during her three-week Onam sojourn in God's Own Country, will be anthologized in "The Best American Travel Writing", a book to be published by Random House in October this year.

A school teacher and science writer, she travelled more than 600 miles by car, train, kettuvallam, foot and kayak reporting a story about the wonderfully diverse wildlife, culture and spirituality of Kerala.

The National Tourism Awards, 2014-15 were presented at a function at VigyanBhavan in New Delhi on Saturday (July 30) by Lok Sabha Speaker Smt. Sumitra Mahajan in the presence of Union Tourism Minister Shri Mahesh Sharma.

Kerala was a proud recipient of 12 awards, including the ones for its Responsible Tourism in Wayanad, a Coffee Table book on the Spice Route, and Sargaalaya Arts and Crafts Village. The award for the American journalist not lends lustre to Kerala's awards but is also a testament to the state's claim as a leading international tourist destination.

".....Kerala, a laid-back tropical paradise where you can paddle hidden backwaters, trek the rugged Western Ghats, look for tigers, indulge in Ayurvedic treatments, and chill out on unspoiled beaches. Just leave your manic Western self behind," she wrote.

While in Kerala, she was struck by how integrated the dense population is with its surrounding wilderness, which is one of the key theme of the story. She was also struck by how Kerala's diverse spirituality touches every aspect of the culture.

Particularly fascinating is her account of the secular Onam festival, which commemorates the return of the legendary king Mahabali, 'who is said to have given every Keralan—whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jew, Jain, or other—equal rights and total prosperity.'

"Over the centuries, Mahabali has morphed into an Indian version of Santa Claus, and you'll find him everywhere—on billboards hawking new cars and in the flesh twirling parasols in parades," wrote the journalist, who has toured all continents except Antarctica. Her experiences have appeared in top publications such as National Geographic, Lonely Planet, Discovery and a number of books.



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She also gives a vivid account of the traditional Onam meal, *sadya*, which she savoured, as having “26 vegetarian servings like ash gourd, masala curry, sambar, papadams, mango pickles, and pressed rice flakes with jaggery, which were served on a banana leaf and eaten by hand”.

Another interesting account in the write-up is of the Aranmula Boat Race, a 700-year-old, nearly one-mile contest that starts at the Aranmula Temple on the River Pamba. “The race, in which 120-foot-long *palliyodams*, or snake boats, from 48 villages go head-to-head in front of thousands of spectators, has the pomp and circumstance of the Olympics and seems a fitting end to the celebration. The race is mayhem.....If this raucous festival is an accurate representation of life in the state famously known as God’s Own Country, then, I decide, God must thrive on chaos and like to have fun.”

Ms Pearson was both amazed and impressed by Kerala, ‘roughly the size of Maryland and Delaware combined, having a population of 35 million—about the same number of people in the entire country of Canada. Despite the masses, Kerala is intensely beautiful.’

The article, written in a lucid, flamboyant and anecdotal style, delves into the entire facets of Kerala’s life – its picturesque and rich in biodiversity Western Ghats, one of India’s [seven Unesco Natural World Heritage sites](#), the picturesque backwaters, medicinal herbs, Ayurvedic hospitals, spices, flowers, hill stations.

The journalist salutes Kerala’s rich cultural ethos and religious pluralism. “As the epicenter of the world’s spice trade, Kerala has also endured as a largely independent, multicultural society for centuries. It’s a mind-boggling amalgam of cultures and beliefs,” she notes.

“Kerala also has affordable universal health care, the lowest infant mortality rate in India, and an average life expectancy of 73, seven years higher than the national average. In almost every quality-of-life indicator, Kerala is off the charts. And in a state where there are 2,200 people per square mile, my Western notions of rugged individualism and wide-open spaces may need a little adjusting,” she writes.

The American journalist goes poetic at times. “Small villages line the canals and are surrounded by a chlorophyll heaven of rice paddies, banana leaves, and gardens of spinach, long beans, and curry. Lavender houses, indigo pet peacocks, women in brightly colored saris, and men in plaid dhotis pop out of the foliage in brilliant relief. This is the land of Arundhati Roy, who spent part of her childhood in the village of Aymanam, where she set her haunting novel *The God of Small Things*.”

And she concludes by mentioning some famous names that keep flocking to God’s Own Country for finding inner solace and savouring its spectacular natural beauty.

“.... the vibe is local and chill, and guests like Paul McCartney come to tuck into thatch-roofed bungalows for yoga and Ayurvedic treatments. Western-style sports like surfing and stand-up paddle boarding are just starting to take root farther south, near the cliff-edged beaches of Varkala and the more developed Kovalam.”