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THE REAL KERALA

Kerala is unquestionably a dream destination. Backwaters aside, it charms with its old-fashioned settlements, unspoilt coastline, rolling hills and valleys, lush green coconut groves and a spiced perfumed air everywhere you go.

In ancient times, it was scent spices that lured merchant ships from as far away as Phoenicia, Egypt, Babylon, Assiya and China, all willing to brave the currents of the high seas just to land on Kerala’s shores.

They were followed by the Arabs and the Europeans — including the Portuguese, Dutch and British — all of whom marched in after Vasco da Gama established the route from Europe by sailing around Africa’s Cape Of Good Hope. These traders established a cultural melting pot in Kerala that differentiates the region from the rest of India.

Here, the air is fresh and the sky is blue. When travelling across the region, it’s amazing to observe how the placid beauty of the land has influenced the people’s lifestyle, which has remained slow and easy-going. The land seems to be blessed by the gods — and perhaps that’s why one of the nicknames of Kerala is “God’s own country”.

Different religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism coexist harmoniously here. These diverse faiths were introduced with the influx of traders, travellers and missionaries. The Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry, the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram, the Santa Cruz Basilica in Kochi or the mosque in Munnar still have

learn how to swim (sometimes even before they learn how to walk).

Kerala on my mind

Can’t forget a place of charmed backwaters and charming laid-back people

SINGAPOR...
equal status in the society here.

Needless to say, there is a lot to do in Kerala in terms of sightseeing. You can take a look at what remains of the European and Chinese influence in Fort Kochi located in the municipal- ity of Kochi, or wander through nar- row streets of the old Jewish town of Mattancherry, visit the spice gardens at Thekkady or tea gardens at Mun- nar, or simply relax at the world-fa- mous Kovalam beach after a tradition- al “Ayurvedic” treatment.

**BOATING BLISS**

As fascinating as those sights are, they can’t top the quintessential Ker- ala experience: A  backwater cruise in a Kerala-style houseboat called “Kettuvallam”. Made of bamboo, cane, coir and wood, these beauti- ful vessels, which were earlier used to transport rice, have been refash- ioned into stylishly furnished floating cottages. Their exotic images brand tourism in Kerala. With Kerala’s more than 1,900km of waterways, obvi- ously there are many coastal points to begin a voyage, but the two most popular are Alappuzha and Kollam, the latter eulogised by great travelers like Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta.

The cruise provides a unique oppor- tunity to witness a pulsing syn- ergy between nature and human life which hasn’t changed much. As the sun rose above the horizon, it was in- teresting to notice how life springs into action in this rural quarter. Ca- noes piled with fruits and vegetables or carrying office workers and school-children crowd the waterways, while women washing dishes shyly turned away from curious eyes of visitors passing by. The aroma of wood fire and unnamed spices from the kitch- en hearts drifted in the air.

As the day moved on, the wayside scenery changed: Children on their way to school stopped at times to scuf- fle with each other, farmers worked in the fields,

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The freshest seafood is always available in Kerala.
Kerala on my mind

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the adjacent paddy fields with ox-driven ploughs while weary fishermen, whose faces are weathered by years of sun and surf, returned home with their catch.

The houseboats stopped at these points for visitors to buy some seafood, but more for an opportunity to mingle with the locals. Many of them can converse in English — Kerala has the highest literacy rates in India. Around noon, when the temperature soars, you can see entire families out splashing in the water to get respite from the heat. It’s not just humans — there was even a buffalo half-submerged in the stream.

While a lazy silence filled the afternoon, the joie de vivre picked up again in the evening. With the sun slowly sinking into the horizon, people sat by the banks dangling their feet in water, while greeting travelers in passing houseboats with waves and mirth.

As night crept in, the croaking frogs took up the chorus of the evening song. It was almost reminiscent of the morning chorus, when nature sounded its “alarm”. It was time to hit the sack.

Our houseboat dwellers retired to our bunks, recounting the encounters of the rewarding day. Tomorrow, another dawn summoned by Mother Nature awaited. And we could not wait for it to begin again.
DO WE REALLY NEED THIS?

Start-up invents Wi-Fi touchscreen wine bottle

But some punters are wondering if this isn’t the most pointless invention ever?

LONDON – Ever wish there was a touchscreen on your wine bottle? Of course you didn’t. No one has ever wished for their wine to have Wi-Fi, because it is an idea that borders on stupid.

Drinking wine is one of the few pursuits uninterrupted by technology, unless you are watching it in front of Netflix or you are glued to your phone. However, a start-up called Kuvee has decided its first product should be a Wi-Fi-enabled wine bottle, so that you can scroll through pictures of more wine bottles before you have even finished quaffing the one in your hand.

They helpfully point out that to serve the wine, you “simply tilt and pour like a regular bottle”.

You buy wine cartridges for it and it tells you what kind of wine you’re drinking on the touch screen. (This will be very helpful for all those people who buy wine bottles without labels on.) You can also read pairing notes on what to drink the wine with (sadly, they have not invented cheese with a touchscreen yet), and see photos of who made the wine.

It also estimates how much wine there is left in the bottle, in case you’re unable to estimate from the weight or by looking at it.

You cannot actually see how much wine there is in the bottle with this product, as it is opaque, and the number on the screen is a loose estimation.

The bottle also has to be regularly charged, which may hinder its romantic appeal — we’re not sure if it would be romantic to serve wine from a Wi-Fi bottle to your beau, while it is attached to a charger!

The charge also only lasts for five to six hours at a time, so it won’t even last a whole evening. Luckily, it can be used as a regular bottle when the battery dies.

“We never want to prevent you from having a glass of wine,” said a spokesperson for the start-up.