

POOVAR

Island

South India's Shangri-La. By Brinda Ganesan

My friend Prashanth calls from Trivandrum. It is an invite to the city steeped in culture and arts with a dash of scenery. I have visited this state capital three times. The human mind yearns for a change and newness. Adventure issues out of such notions. "Ready for adventure? Come and stay at Poovar island. Be marooned like Robinson Crusoe" suggests Prashanth. The predilection for exploring new avenues propels me to set off for the expedition. We alight at Neyyatinkara (again a new location) the penultimate station before Trivandrum.

The sedan after passing through a bazaar and a temple zips past the Kerala-styled houses and finally reaches a well-paved boat jetty. It is a sunny day and the place is swarming with passengers. Our out-of-the-world experience has started here itself. After a wait of 20 minutes a motor boat from the resort arrives to pick us up. The boat ride is

gripping. As it cruises through the Neyyar river flanked by vegetation on both sides, we watch nature in its full glory. The cormorants skim over the lakes. The egrets swoop and soar out of the creepers and vines. A kingfisher dives for its prey. The ambience is so serene and still that even a whisper would be an infringement. As the boat negotiates a curve the river widens and suddenly the spuming sea separates from the backwaters by an aureate sand bar looming before us. The sight is so bewitching that we fail to notice that we have reached Poovar. The launch is berthed on the edge of the island near the jetty. Adjacent to it are thatched cottages positioned on placid waters creating an illusion of floating on it. The ethereal surrounding beckons us to explore it. Unmindful of the usual formalities, pangs of hunger we hop into the boat and sail to the beach just across the island. The sky is grey though it is just half an hour past noon. The

heavens may open at any time. The beach seems to be a tranquil and no-litter zone.

Nobody except the three of us are present on the golden sands. We turn back to have a glimpse of the islet and its environs. All the beauties of nature can be found in this place. Poovar lies at the cusp of backwaters and sea and a river which empties into that sea at a close proximity. It is also blessed with a stretch of beach which separates it from the backwaters.

We walk up to the mouth of the estuary. But the beach does not end here. The busier beach at Chowara peters out 12 kms south at Poovar where the river Neyyar joins the sea. Thus, the extraordinary confluence of river, lake, beach and sea is Poovar's unique offering. This little paradise, tucked away on the southern tip of Kerala in the purlieu of Trivandrum (25 kms) away is literally cradled in the arms of nature.

Turning to history, before some



cataclysmic event threw up a sandbar here, a harbour used to overlook the estuary, which is said to be the port Orphyr famous in the ancient world as a flourishing trade centre. The island's name is connected with monarchs too. Raja Marthanda Ravi Verma, was given asylum here by a powerful local merchant Moosa Marikkar. Flowers that had fallen from kovala trees covered the river Neyyar with a carpet of red, a picturesque scene described by the king as 'Poo aa' or the stream of flowers. An apt description that even today succinctly defines the island of Poovar.

We don't know how much time we spent gazing at the horizon. As day melts in night the eternal crimson ball starts drowning into the sea. The waves gently lap around our feet. The zephyr ruffles our hair gently. Can anyone expect a more romantic setting?

RIPPLING WAVES

We return to our 'floating' cottage only to be rocked by the rippling waves. Even in the darkness we can see some boats on the move. We scurry out to the deck to have the candle-light dinner under the ultramarine sky and a thousand twinkling stars. Next day at cockcrow we rush back to the beach. We are completely obsessed with the pristine

beach. Now, we see some fishermen spreading their nets and readying for their daily business in the sea. We enjoy a catamaran ride. Poovar is basically a fishermen's village. Our expedition continues to a nearby village. The chat with the locals is

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Boating in the water boulevard.





Relaxing near the swimming pool.



Beautiful view of the backwaters and the beach from the deck.

interesting. Once back in the resort, we move along the water meadows, village green and landscaped gardens with no intruders. The coconut and palm trees sway to greet us. Throughout the island, coconut trees and invigorating sea breeze thread their way among beautiful landscape. Breakfast and tea are disregarded. At times we are at the fringes of the island and birds flap their wings and fly for their daily chores. The chirping and warbling of the avian population provide food to our ears and souls. Luxuriant nature triumphs over creature comforts. That is the magic of Poovar! After the morning constitutional, we have a dip in the natural pool and move to another resort which is just another part of this magnificent island.

NOW, WE WISH TO EXPLORE THE PLACES AROUND POOVAR. THE FIRST PLACE ON OUR LIST IS VIZHINJAM A FISHING VILLAGE NEAR THE MUCH HYPED AND CONGESTED KOVALAM. THIS TINY VILLAGE HAS ONE OF THE ANCIENT ROCK-CUT TEMPLES IN KERALA.

Now, we wish to explore the places around Poovar. The first place on our list is Vizhinjam, a fishing village near the much hyped and congested Kovalam. This tiny village has one of the ancient rock-cut temples in Kerala. Located in a beautiful garden some 13 kms from Poovar, it has a niche cave on a

boulder which encloses a one-celled shrine with a loose sculpture of Vinamdhara Dakshinamoorthy. The outer wall has unfinished reliefs of Siva and Parvati in dancing poses. These sculptures date back to 8th century. History says that this place was the ancient capital of Ay kings who ruled Kerala centuries ago.

THE VIZHINJAM HARBOUR

Our chauffeur now drives us to the Vizhinjam harbour. As this site is close to international sea route a state-of-the-art port is being developed at this place But what we see is boats bobbing at a distance, a beautiful view of the bay, the *minars* of a mosque and a poorly maintained beach. A local warns that this place is not only dirty but also unsafe in the evenings. Now, our jaunt is along the banks of the Neyyar. In days of yore, *ghee* (Ney) was flowing in this river. Hence the name. The miss-not-to-see spot here is a beautiful shrine dedicated to Lord Krishna. As the legend goes Prince Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma when fleeing from his enemies was saved by Lord Krishna in the guise of a boy by asking him to hide in the hollow of a jackfruit tree. The remnant of the *ammachi pilavu*, or mother jackfruit, is still preserved near the western entrance of the temple. We walk round to the north side of the temple to view the river winding below. The door to the Sri Kovil (sanctum) is painted in gold.

The post-lunch session includes a spectacular canoe ride around the island. It is a blissful (too small a word) experience to sit back and admire nature. The oarsman, a local, speaks in 'Tamiyalam' (Tamil with Malayalam accent) regales us with his own never-heard stories. The flapping of the birds and the plop of the paddle are the only sounds to be heard. One need not be Salim Ali to watch the birds here. Most of the channels (narrow and wide) are water boulevards with a green canopy and a sun sneaking through the thick foliage.

UNPREDICTABLE RAINS

Suddenly it starts drizzling. Even a shower is welcome in this ambience. With only Mother Nature to give us shelter we take refuge in a coconut grove. Rains are unpredictable in Kerala not to speak of an island like Poovar. If you are much concerned about your clothes and skin then carry an umbrella or wear a raincoat advises our boatman. But the showers are intermittent. It stops within a short time.

But we are not in a mood to return to the dinghy. We walk amidst the groves. The scene has become entirely different! The pastures completely washed looks afresh! The verdure is overwhelming! The scene is as if straight from a picture post card. The scenery act as a balm to city-weary eyes. We gulp a cup of *kashayam* (an ayurvedic potion) to reduce the ill-effects of becoming wet to the skin.

With the ways of nature etched in our minds we hit the bed.

On the final day in the morning we once again go to the beach to have a rendezvous. Our children collect the shells and oyster. So the lads and ladies attempt to play some outdoor game. Like a solitary reaper I saunter on the white sands to devour nature's munificence. I wish I could walk straight into the surging waves or become one with the rippling brook.

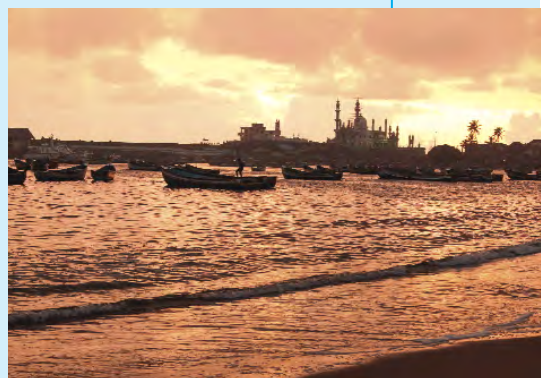


But the mundane thoughts pull me back. With tears brimming my eyes I salute the sol with a *Gayatri mantra* and proceed towards the boat.

Any trip to Thiruvananthapuram would be incomplete without a visit to the Padmanabaswamy temple. Even an atheist will enjoy a visit to this shrine. It is maintained by the royal descendants. The temple is immaculate and the sculptures are noteworthy. One can learn how a temple should be maintained.

The other feature is the main deity, the Anantha Padmanabha, reclining on a five-hooded serpent, could be seen only through three separate openings.

Poovar – Nature's Benjamin



Poovar's is a rare environment and a good balance between ecology and luxury.

Enveloped by the most serene backwaters and opening out to the sea and a dream golden beach, it offers the best panoramic view of the natural wonder.

Relax, unwind and let your heart go into the ecological mantra. No need for massages of any type. Take a stroll in the hues and shades of green dotted with brilliant flowers . Or do nothing and just let your heart hear the sound of waves and the babble of the brook. Serenity itself is a de-stressor.

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