

# State of



# Bliss

The western Indian state of Kerala holds within its borders a surprising array of natural beauty and sparsely populated wide-open spaces. Yes, this IS India! Words and pictures by **Michael Franco**



Fruit sellers in Munnar



Mountain Lake Outside Munnar



Traditional Houseboat



Marari Beach Sunset



Spice Seller in 'Jew Town'



Traffic Jam in Cochin

We have just climbed up a steep hillside through the reedy green of a cardamom field and are now winding our way along a dirt path that snakes through a tea plantation—something akin to walking across a giant head of broccoli. In the distance, the setting sun is turning the Western Ghat Mountains into layered grey cardboard cutouts. The air is cool, all is calm, and I think: “THIS is India?”

It's certainly not what I anticipated on my first visit to the world's second-most populated country. I'd envisioned crowded streets, heaving markets, cow-blocked traffic, dusty heat and people bustling shoulder-to-shoulder everywhere I turned. But this is Kerala—not the teeming north—and things are different here.

Stretching along India's southwestern coast, Kerala has the highest literacy rate in the country (and one of the highest per capita newspaper readerships on earth). It also has low pollution, a low infant mortality rate and an environmental awareness derived from caretaking a varied and robust mélange of natural resources.

The mountains—especially those around the hillside village of Munnar—hold not only the tea plantations that cling to the sides of their severe slopes, but also spice groves where cardamom, pepper, vanilla and cinnamon grow in easy profusion. There are also pockets of vivid blue lakes, and valley floors dotted with grazing cows and streaked with streams fed by tumbling waterfalls. Heading down the mountain, the crops change to pineapples, bananas, tapioca and cashew trees. And finally, coming to flat land again, glowing green rice fields and coconut trees dominate the landscape (in fact, Kerala means “land of coconut”). >>

It is in these lowlands where you will find the much-revered “backwaters.” This series of bird-blessed canals that radiates out from the enormous Lake Vembanad is best enjoyed by spending a night or two in a *kettuvallum*, a houseboat made from a traditional 8-metre-long cargo boat.

We boarded one of these floating homes early one afternoon and were greeted by a smiling three-man crew who introduced themselves as our cook, captain and first mate. As we settled into two criminally comfortable chairs, our new friends got busy transporting us out across the unruffled surface of Lake Vembanad while we dove into our cooling “welcome” coconuts.

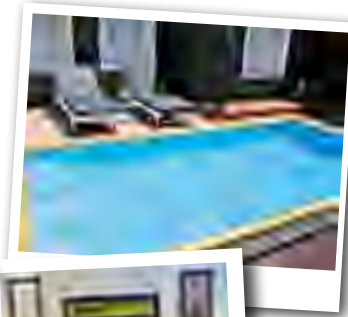
For the next five hours we floated through a dreamlike landscape. Because our thatch-roofed houseboat was more a traditional variety than some of the monster-sized deluxe vessels, we were able to wander down secretive canals where small boats sold fruit, water and other necessities to the residents of well-kept concrete homes painted electric blue, power purple, flamboyant green, and truly shocking pink. As the sun gracefully lowered itself in the sky, the air took on a misty haze through which the endless rice paddies and palm trees looked even more exotic.

Nighttime brought a mouthwatering vegetarian meal, an hour of simple stargazing and an early retreat to our bedroom where the aircon had been set, and the mosquito net romantically draped around the bed. A modern bathroom with a surprisingly roomy shower helped us wash off the heat of the day.

In the morning, we woke to the sound of chattering fishermen who seemed just as skinny as the poles they were using to haul mussels up from the lake floor while balancing in slight skiffs. As their silhouettes were painted in by the rising red ball of the sun, we enjoyed a breakfast bursting with fresh fruit, our talk turning to how Kerala might have spoiled India for us. After all, how could we ever head up to the chockablock north, when this level of peace, serenity and simple beauty was waiting for us, just a four-hour flight away? ●

## GETTING THERE

Singapore airlines has daily flights to and from Kochin, a city in the north of the state and a perfect jumping-off point for the houseboat cruises to the south and the mountains of Munnar to the east.



## WHERE TO STAY

To keep things simple and at the same time extremely sumptuous, you can't go wrong by aligning yourself with the CGH Earth group of hotels ([www.cghearth.com](http://www.cghearth.com)).

The owners have created resorts that feel more like villages—all designed with a striking sensitivity to the

surrounding environments. During our trip, we had the good fortune of staying at **Coconut Lagoon** in Kumarakom—a collection of polished-wood buildings scattered about an extensive property bordering Lake Vembanad. The buffet-style meals were

all first rate as were the excursions into local villages that the hotel offers. The deluxe pool villas are worth the splurge; they're lakeside and you can watch the houseboats cruise by from your private verandah—that is, of course, if you can tear yourself away from the private pool out back. We also visited **Marari Beach**, a stunning piece of property on a pristine palm-backed stretch of sand that reaches from horizon to horizon. The evening buffet set to live music performances is the perfect way to end each day.

In Munnar, you can get to know and love a local family by staying at **Royal Mist** ([www.royalmist.in](http://www.royalmist.in)). Run by Anil and Jeeva (and the earnest attention of their two kids), you'll get personalized tours of the plantations just out back of the home as well as home cooked food every morning and evening. Accommodation is basic, but exceedingly clean with everything you could need already anticipated by the great hosts.



## HOW TO CRUISE

CGH's Spice Coast Cruises offer a touch of tradition with all the comforts you could possibly want. Combine a visit to Coconut Lagoon with a Spice Coast Cruise, and you've got a hassle-free holiday.

