

WORDS CHRIS WRIGHT

BLISS IN THE BACKWATER

A slow cruise on the waterways of Kerala, made famous in a Booker Prize-winning novel, is still one of the best ways to get the drift of India.

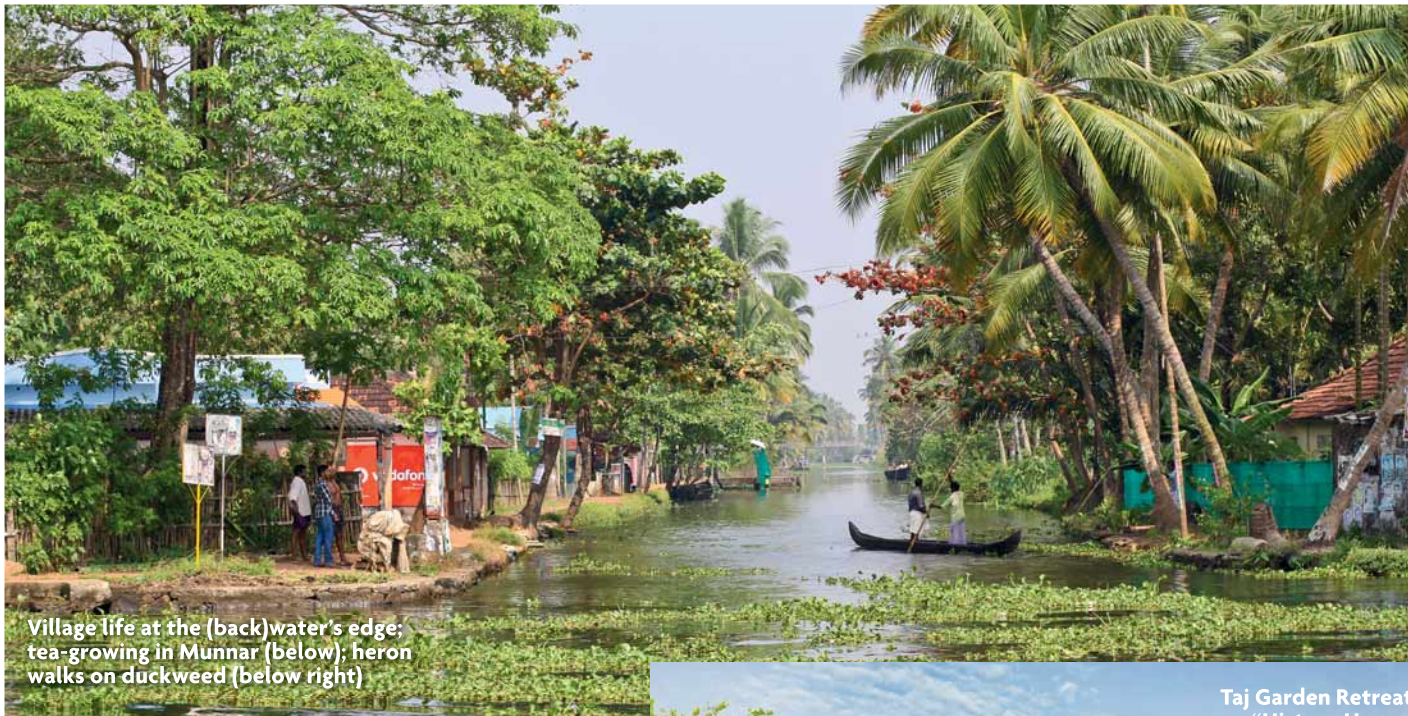
IN 1997, Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things* introduced the world to the southern Indian state of Kerala. In truth, it's an odd sort of a cultural flag-bearer; a story whose key moments hinge on prejudice, betrayal and loss, and one which doesn't always portray its community in a positive light. But its language is so evocative, from the opening lines, which describe "fatly baffled" bluebottles and the "nights, clear but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation", that it has served

as an inspiration for millions of readers. Many found it so seductive that they have come to see the place for themselves. Today, the areas Roy wrote about scarcely need any help in attracting visitors. A few miles from the towns she described sits Kumarakom, where resorts are competing to attract tourists to one of India's most beautiful regions.

Just two hours from the city of Kochi (Cochin), which has direct flights from Singapore, Kumarakom has become the gateway to what is one of southern India's most compelling attractions: the Kuttanad backwaters. >



Home afloat: a *kettuwallam*, a converted rice barge



Village life at the (back)water's edge; tea-growing in Munnar (below); heron walks on duckweed (below right)



It is impossible to discuss this place with anyone who has been here without hearing the expression “God’s own country” – it’s part of state branding now – but it is inarguably magnificent. On *kettuvallam* (converted rice barges), guests drift around a network of inland lakes and rivers, watching everyday life proceed on the banks: people bathing and washing clothes in the water; carpenters artfully chiselling Jesus and Virgin Mary statues for the Syrian Christian churches of the area; men standing in tiny boats, herding hundreds of ducklings up waterways towards their farms.

The houseboat experience, while popular – about 500 of these boats ply the backwaters – is simply one of the more relaxing things to do in India. Kumarakom, on Lake Vembanad, which is connected to the backwaters, is a perfect base for exploration: since the resorts back on to the lake, houseboats can come straight to the door to collect their guests. The town is also a starting point for boat trips through the more intricate and less-visited networks of waterways that lead many kilometres inland between the paddy fields, where sometimes the rivers are all but invisible beneath surface duckweed covered with blossoming hyacinths. An hour or so takes you to Arundhati Roy’s home town, Ayemenem, in which most of the book’s action takes place; the house and factory are based on real locations (and the pickle factory is run by Roy’s uncle).

One Kumarakom location, the Vivanta resort, operated by the Taj group, is where the tourist industry and Roy’s book coincide. The

resort’s centrepiece is a grand house built by 19th-century missionary Alfred George Baker, it housed four generations of his family until the 1970s, after which it passed first to the state, then to the Taj group. Fans of the book will know this as the secretive History House, in which the novel’s devastating climax takes place; in the book, Baker is Kari Saipu the Englishman who became a local.

The resort has handled its heritage with deference and has built a limited number of guest villas between the house and the lake, among ponds designed to nurture local birdlife. Roy wrote of “cold stone floors and billowing, ship-shaped shadows on the walls, where waxy ancestors... with breath that smelled of yellow maps, whispered papery whispers.” While it’s hard to feel that in the bars and hotels that now occupy the former Baker family rooms, the place remains haunting and atmospheric.

Roy was somewhat scathing about the tourist influx into Kerala. “Toy histories for rich tourists to play in,” the book’s narrator called it; “history and literature enlisted by commerce.” She bemoaned the compression of traditional *kathakali* performances for visitors, ▶

BACKWATERS/HERON PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS WRIGHT; TEA-GROWING: GETTY IMAGES; TAJ GARDEN RETREAT: COURTESY TAJ HOTELS, RESORTS & PALACES





KERALA INDIA



Lighthouse Beach, Kovalam; duck herder in the backwaters (left)

“collapsed and amputated”, and mocked the “old communists, who now worked as fawning bearers in colourful ethnic clothes, stooped slightly behind their trays of drinks”. Nevertheless, Kerala and tourists appear to have combined well so far: the interaction is still friendly, the waves from the shore apparently genuine, the people engaging and not obviously cynical. As always, there’s a risk – the impact of 500 diesel barges daily cannot help but be felt eventually. And there are few children along the main byways who have not learned the ubiquitous: “One pen! One pen!” But tourism is better-planned along the backwaters than in much of India.

Kerala is a fascinating state, politically and culturally, and this also forms part of the texture of Roy’s book. Kerala and West Bengal are among the few places in the world to have democratically elected a communist government and both states have consistently voted them back in again. The results of this are visible in the state today: high literacy, an orderly plotting of land and a higher representation of women in bureaucracy. While local theatre and dance is no doubt “compressed”, as Roy complained, it is at least made central to tourists in the resorts; along with the ayurvedic medicine and massage, and Keralan food, quite different from other Indian cuisines, with its widespread use of the local bounty: coconut and mango.

Kumarakom will get bigger. A Radisson has opened there and hoteliers report growing domestic and foreign tourist numbers, the charge led by the British. Kerala offers all the magnificence of India with far less hassle involved in enjoying it. It is a more peaceful, calmer India, and those who overlook it for the tout-clogged riches of Rajasthan and Agra are missing a trick.



See & do

KERALA is served by two international airports – in Kochi (Cochin) and Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum). Many travellers enter by one and leave by the other. Aside from the backwaters, Kerala has some of India’s best beaches. Near Trivandrum, Kovalam is the most developed beach centre, with top-drawer resorts, though it has correspondingly lost a little local charm. Those in search of a more authentic Keralan experience head further north to Varkala, where the beach is flanked by laterite headlands and the hotels perched above it on a cliff.

Kerala also offers some of the most impressive wildlife reserves in the south. Arguably the best, the Tholpetty and Muthanga reserves within the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, take some getting to, but offer wonderful scenery, good eco-resorts, and occasional tiger sightings. Closer to the cities, >

KOVALAM PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; DUCKS: CORBIS AUSTRALIA



KERALA INDIA



Periyar National Park inhabitants: green forest lizard and elephants (left)

Periyar, on an artificial lake, is a good place for spotting wild elephants and Thattekkad is a world-class bird sanctuary. Eravikulam is famous for its antelopes and nearby Munnar is a tea-growing town, high in the hills.

Kerala is the best state to experience Ayurveda – whether a massage or lengthy stay for holistic herbal treatments. It is also known for its *kathakali* theatre and *kalaripayattu*

martial arts. Kochi, in particular, offers a range of *kathakali* experiences, from a one-hour introduction to (literally) all-nighters. Come early to watch the extravagant make-up being applied.

Of the cities, Kochi is perhaps the most attractive, with a harbour and well-preserved colonial architecture from the Portuguese, Dutch and British eras. 🌐

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Tea plantation, Munnar

