

THE JEWEL OF MALABAR

Relaxation is both a virtue and a necessity in India's Kerala – and the best way to soak it all up is a visit to its many boutique hotels.

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COURTESY KERALA TOURISM \ SECRET GARDEN

A Theyyam performer in ritual makeup and head gear



Chandrasekharan Nair Stadium, it could be argued, is the architectural embodiment of Kerala. Located in the busy Palayam district of the state's capital, Trivandrum (officially called Thiruvananthapuram), on Mahatma Gandhi Road, the football stadium is the beating heart of the community. Nearby are a Hindu temple to Ganesh, a Muslim mosque (Palayam Juma Masjid) and a Catholic church (St Joseph's Cathedral). In a country often associated with religious intolerance, the easy, peaceful mingling of the three is a beacon for the rest of the country – and maybe the world. It is also emblematic of the easy-going and leftish nature of this Indian state, which has come to embrace foreign guests.

Kerala, on India's southwest Malabar Coast, is the country's smallest state. It can be said that it is also its oddest – not an easy feat in India. Historically, Kerala's society has been matrilineal and generally left-leaning. The Keralites are possibly India's most politicised, artistic, literate and healthy people. They live in a relatively safe environment – and they eat beef.

If you've never been to India and experienced the typically overwhelming chaos, intensely lush Kerala is a good place to start. Everything that's right and wrong with India is in plain sight. Yet, a tropical resort vibe permeates the controlled chaos of Kerala's cities. There is a laidback feel in the state's most defining spot, the small city of Alleppey (or Alappuzha), which leaves a vivid impression. Kerala is like Thailand without the calculated pleantries of that kingdom's well-oiled tourism machine.

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02 A tiger in Thiruvananthapuram Zoo. Kerala State has promoted tiger sanctuaries.

03 A scene outside the Vadakkumnathan Temple during the Aanayoottu, a ceremony in which elephants are ritually fed by villagers. Elephants are worshipped as divine symbols in Kerala, though there is controversy about elephant ownership and management.

04 A cattle race in Kerala – normally taking place at harvest time, the races are conducted in 100-metre purpose built muddy tracks.

05 Local men launch a boat in the surf at Marari Beach, near Alappuzha town.

PLENTY TO OFFER

Visitors will also be pleasantly surprised to find that Kerala has been at the forefront of India’s eco-tourism wave. Several tiger reserves spread to neighbouring Tamil Nadu – indicating the state’s progressive view of conservation – and its place on the coast makes it a magnet for beachgoers.

Efforts to attract visitors started in the 1980s, and tourism has slowly grown to become an important part of the economy, as visitors search for an enchanted vision of India. Over 850,000 visitors arrived in 2013, up 8 per cent from 2012, according to government statistics. The most popular visiting months are from December to February, when the rains subside and the temperature cools slightly.

Kerala offers plenty of cultural experiences for the visitor. There are ancient traditions such as the Kathakali dance, with performers sliding and stomping around in heavily ornamented costumes and expressing themselves through facial gestures. Food lovers will have something new to dig into, as the cuisine recalls Thai food for its heavy use of coconut. But Kerala’s cuisine benefits from a spice trade history dating to 3,000 BC, giving local foods a distinct flavour (the spicy pickled lemons are addictive). Keralites scoff at “bland” Madras curry.

Add to all that a growing medical tourism sector and Kerala’s status as the home of Ayurvedic therapy, the Indian traditional medical treatment considered a progenitor of Chinese traditional medicine.

THE RESORT ROUTE

One of the best ways to tour Kerala is via its small, one-off resorts and guesthouses. Maneesha Panicker, founder and director of Silk Route Escapes, was

looking to avoid the mass tourism polish when she gave up life in Manhattan to go home and show off the inimitable parts of India.

“I loved New York City, so it was hard to leave. But I strongly believed there was a better way to experience India – one that I had seen on campaign trails with my [politician] father – a very up-close and personal India filled with real people, real stories, and real connections,” she explains. “Plus, it’s much more fun riding elephants and taking a canoe to work than sitting in a New York office.”

That’s no joke. On the canals, rivers and lakes that make up Alleppey’s backwaters, a canoe is often the only way to get from houseboat to houseboat. One does need to be respectful of the bathing hour for the locals who live along the banks.

As a native and trilingual Keralite, Panicker is attuned to Kerala’s under-the-radar spots and events; she just arranges it from a five-star hotel. Silk Route Escapes specialises in customised luxury itineraries for visitors wanting a unique experience in Kerala, with the arts and cuisine figuring heavily on her list of things to do.

ANTI-BOLLYWOOD BIRTHPLACE

Roughly midway up the coast, Kochi (or Cochin) is home to Kerala’s robust art scene, being the birthplace of India’s independent film industry – a sort of anti-Bollywood. Not surprisingly, it was chosen to host the country’s first art biennale in 2012 (the second edition runs December 12, 2014 to March 29, 2015).

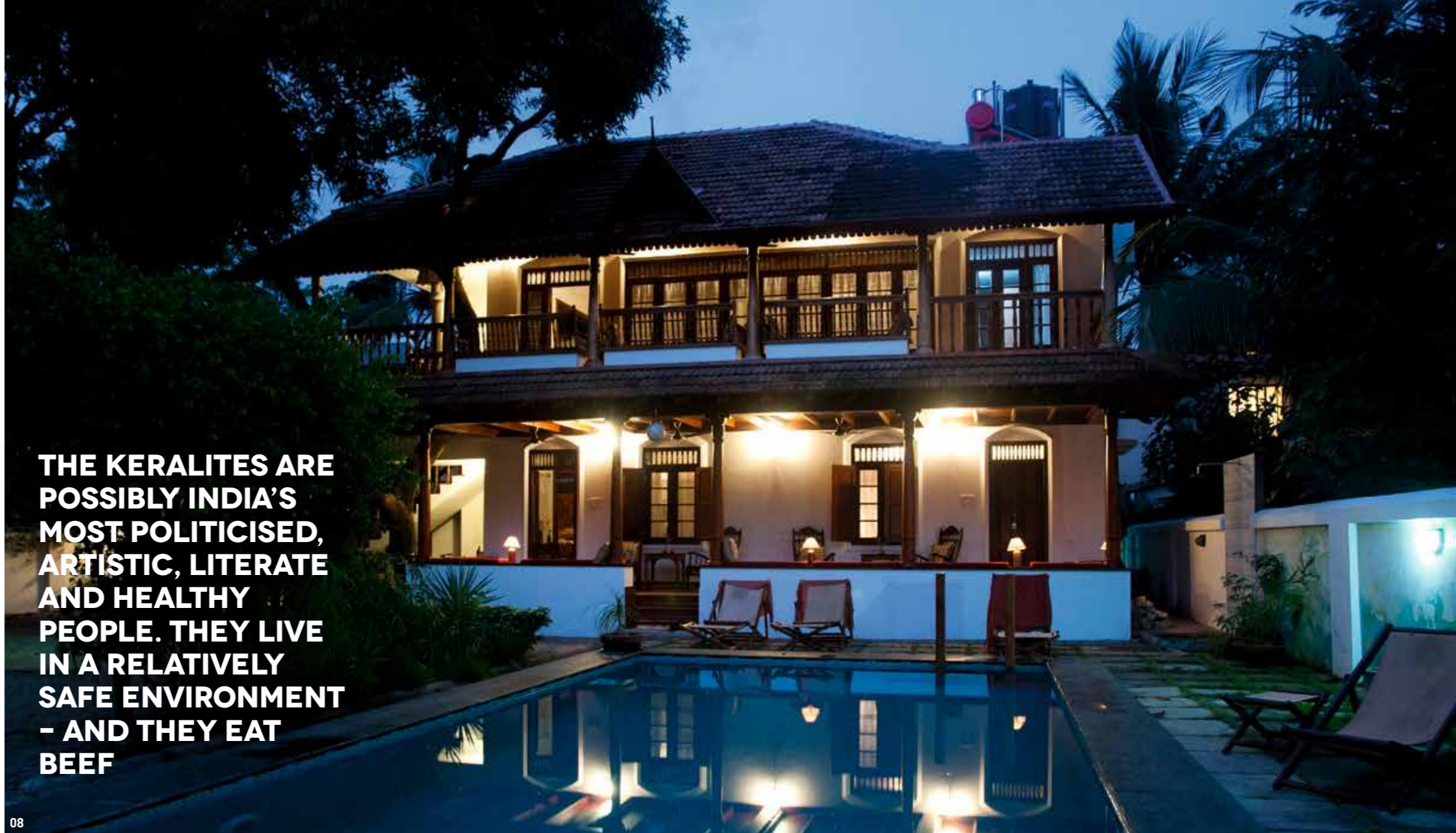
The old part of the city, known as Fort Kochi since the Portuguese founded it in the 1500s, is ground zero for stylish cafés, art galleries and local boutique stores. Everything is wrapped in colonial architecture,



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and it is the genteel half of this part of the city, with Mattancherry serving as the more frantic half.

Inside Fort Kochi you'll find, with a bit of walking about, Icelandic architect Thora Gudmundsdottir's Secret Garden, tucked well away on a back street. She relocated to Kerala from Iceland after buying the former family house in Fort Kochi, which features a perfect mix of Indian and colonial design. She converted it into a boutique hotel and has been running it since 2007. Her assistants can help make one's stay here quite special. When the power cuts out during a storm – completely normal in Kerala – Tony, a soft-spoken, curious student always on the lookout for book recommendations, makes for a great chat partner. And when the storm passes, Gudmundsdottir's right hand, Faizal, will throw you on the back of his motorbike for a quick ride out for dinner.

ON THE ROAD UNMARKED

Kochi is the easy-going counterpoint to the more business- and bureaucracy-minded southern city of Trivandrum. If a break from the isolation of the backwaters is needed (or you are desperate for a stable internet connection), the capital does provide the

creature comforts of urban life, including five-star hotels such as the Taj, with beaches a few minutes away.

Like the rest of India, Kerala teems with life. There are no bare stretches of road; the four-hour drive up the main highway from south to north is a slow, full-day affair and involves dodging animals, street vendors, school buses, ramshackle street markets and *chai wallahs* (specialised tea vendors).

A driver is a must in Kerala; roads are often unmarked and while speaking the local Malayalam is not essential, it can come in handy. The ride between Trivandrum and Kochi can include a stop for breakfast at a roadside hotel (a restaurant) for a popular dosa and chutney, *idiyappam* (rice flour noodle) or sometimes *appam*, a fermented rice and coconut milk pancake. Breakfast does not include a fork until a laconic waiter saunters over and drops one delicately. The same, unrushed look comes from a tea seller who can't fathom the concept of a tea to go. In typical Keralite fashion, the idea is to sit and relax for a few minutes.

For those wanting to slow down and relax some more, there is Vismaya, a boutique hotel in a 400-year-old, converted house now run by a Belgian

06 Dugout canoes are a common way of getting around Kerala's backwaters.

07 Native women of Kuruva Island along the Kabini River, a place known for wildlife including elephants.

08 The Secret Garden guesthouse, designed by Icelandic architect Thora Gudmundsdottir.

couple. Vismaya is literally off the beaten – and paved – path. The two suites have no in-room desks, televisions or WiFi, although a 2G internet connection in the common room offers some consolation. The bathroom is outside. It does, however, have Vinod, who sees to guests with the stealth of a ninja and the grace of a Michelin-starred restaurant's maitre d'.

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

There is no real town to walk to – Vismaya is about getting away from it all – but the kids in the neighbourhood are more than willing to ham it up for a foreign camera. "What is he getting up to now?" a rambunctious, unnamed eight-year-old's father asks from the doorway of the local grocer. It turns out the kid has done this before, and the revelation that a hard copy of a photo has been handed over elicits a hearty, eye-rolling response: "Oh, everyone at school is going to be looking at that for weeks!" Vinod knows most of the kids and isn't in the least surprised by their excitability.

Not too far from Vismaya is Serenity at Kanam Estate, which is farther inland still near the small town of Vazhoor. Set amid the rolling hills and spice

farms that come as you head east into Kerala, Vazhoor couldn't be more different from the slinky waters of the coast.

Serenity is a sprawling colonial plantation house that still feels like it might have a few hundred years ago. And there are worse places to dabble in Ayurveda. Be cautioned: Ayurvedic therapists will challenge personal concepts of modesty. At Serenity's spa, the *patra pinda* detoxifying massage uses fresh and dried local plants and is utterly free of Western prudery.

There's no pointing and staring, but there's also no fluffy robes and private change rooms, and your therapists – yes, two – will wait patiently as you learn to swallow your pride and get on the table. It may not be for everyone, but it smacks of an egalitarianism that goes back hundreds of years and flies in the face of the country's well-documented caste system. Leave it to Kerala to invent something that goes against the grain. ☺

www.silkrouteescapes.com
www.secretgarden.in
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