



Travel with LIZ BARRY

KERALA LAND OF THE COCONUT

LIZ BARRY

TRAVELLED TO INDIA AT THE BEGINNING OF DECEMBER
TO EXPLORE THE SOUTHERN STATE OF KERALA
AND FOUND AN EDEN-LIKE COUNTRY

Welcome to God's Own Country, declares the road side sign.

Lush, tropical palms laden with coconuts tower over us, while snowy white egrets stand on the banks of the river. It may not be the Garden of Eden - but it is close enough. This is Kerala, Southern India where the waves of the Arabian sea wash across the golden sands and the mountains stretch to the rich tea and spice plantations of Munnar in the Western Ghats.



Over the course of 10 days we travelled from the coastal town of Kovalam, along the backwaters of Alleppey on a houseboat, spent time in a village at a family homestay, then drove up into the cooler mountain ranges before ending our journey at the seaport of Kochi.

Houseboats, or kettuvallams as they are known locally were once used for transporting the rice harvest but today they offer a great way to explore the labyrinth of canals, lakes and lagoons. The three-strong crew, *Captain Binu*, his assistant and a chef greeted us as we walked along the river bank to board our golden thatched luxurious accommodation. We sat on the open deck as we cast off from shore and relaxed into the gentle pace as *Binu* guided us through the huge expanse of Vembanadu Lake.

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Kochi

Vembanadu Lake

Neipura Heritage Homestay

Kuttanad

Kovalam





◀ A patchwork of paddy fields edged the river banks, which was hardly surprising as the region is known as the rice bowl of Kerala.

For lunch *Ajith* the cook served *Kalan*, a hot banana curry with rice and fried pearl spot fish, fresh from the lake.

In the afternoon we boarded a canoe to explore the smaller channels of the backwater. Vines formed a lush canopy overhead as we languidly paddled past brightly painted bungalows in shades of orange, pink and lime

green. An unusual sound broke the quiet. Thwack, thwack. Ladies stood waist deep in water could be seen holding soapy clothes, throwing the garments against a flat stone, pummeling the dirt away. Wash day transforms the river bank into a colourful collage with saris, tops, socks and vests draped across bushes and fences to dry.

We leave the comfort of the houseboat behind and travel 6 Km by road to the *Nelpura Heritage Homestay* where we were to stay for the next two nights. ▶





◀ *Nelpura Heritage Homestay* stands on the banks of a canal. It is a renovated, disused grain store with fine woodcarving and traditional Kerala architecture and adjoins the 150 year old ancestral home of *Professor Chacko* and his family.

Cold drinks of fresh grape juice were laid out on the veranda and along with a sheet of useful information. I knew I had travelled deeper into the wilderness when firstly I read *"though all precautions are taken, you may occasionally spot a spider or*

a lizard, please do not be panicked they are eco-friendly" and secondly *"close the doors before twilight to avoid the insect menace"* with a first aid kit, mosquito repellent and creams for a multitude of insect bite and stings I hoped I was well prepared.

The village was in Kuttanad, an agricultural area noted for its farming below sea level, with rice being the major crop. When the rice plants blossom they attract flocks of parrots.

Professor Chacko has lived here all his life and encourages the interaction of visitors and the local community. He arranged for us to go along to the local primary school to meet the children. The younger ones sang to us in their own language which is Malayalam whilst the older ones sang a folksong in English. During the morning we answered many questions,

admired their written text. It is interesting to note that Kerala has the highest rate of literacy in the world.



One of the children in the nursery class was celebrating her birthday and instead of her grey uniform she wore a long red dress with ▶





◀ beautiful jewellery, a decorative bindi on her forehead. Kohl and make-up emphasised her already dark eyes. She had the look of a little princess and laughed as her classmates clapped as we all sang Happy Birthday to her.

It had been a privilege to visit the school, and fascinating to see the eagerness of the children to learn and the enthusiasm of their teachers, which far out shone the modest school surroundings. Leaving behind supplies of sweets, we crossed the yard to shouts of goodbyes from the children clambering in the doorways to wave us off.



The backwaters of Kerala are captivating in their beauty, the charm of the people and the unhurried pace in contrast to the bustle of city life. It is great place for a winter break when temperatures are in the 80's and the humidity is low. If the world of waterways becomes too much, the cool mountains and tea plantations are only a half days drive away. I will tell you about my journey there another time.



All Kerala
photographs:
LIZ BARRY

FACT FILE

Flights Emirates Airways London via Dubai: www.emirates.com

Transportation and accommodation arranged through local tour company: www.in-love-with-kerala.com

Nelpura Heritage Homestay: www.nelpura.com

Houseboat through Punnamada Resort: www.punnamada.com

