Drifting in Kerala: A boat trip reveals the backwaters of the lovely south India state

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Fishing for a meal in Alappuzha, India.

By Mackenzie Evan Smith

ALAPPUZHA, India -- Moments after stepping off the bus in this southern coastal town, I was submerged in a wave of touts.

"Look here, look here!" they demanded, flashing torn postcards of boats floating down canals soaked in sunset. They've correctly guessed that I've come to see Kerala's famed backwaters, a spaghetti of waterways stretching across the south Indian state.

A popular way to explore these backwaters is a night on a houseboat modeled after a traditional rice barge, or kettuvallum in Malayalam. Traditionally, the boats transported rice and spices from the Kuttanadu region of Kerala to Fort Cochin. From there, the goods boarded ships bound for every corner of the world. But India's sprawling train network slowly transformed shipping, and many of the kettuvallums, which means "to tie" and "boat" in Malayalam, were abandoned. In recent decades a surge of tourism to Kerala has given the rice barges new purpose.

**If you go**

While it's tempting to book ahead of time, it's best to see the actual boat before putting down any money.

Arrive in Alappuzha in the morning if you want to book for the next day -- boats typically return between 9 and 11 a.m. for cleaning and restocking, and this is a good time to take a peek.

Most houseboats cost 5,000 rupees (about $100) and up for two people during high season (November to February). During the shoulder seasons (October and March) boats can be a little less, and there are bigger discounts during the low season (April to September).

Be clear about what's in the price: your stay, the crew, lunch, dinner, breakfast and a couple of bottles of water are usually included. Air conditioning, soft drinks, alcohol and tips are extra.

If you're unable to commit to overnight on a boat, afternoon trips on small canoes are possible in backwater towns throughout Kerala.

Alappuzha is the most popular spot to launch backwater cruises, but boats can also be found in large numbers at Kollam and Kochi.

This rise in visitors isn't accidental: The state aggressively campaigns its charms to travelers. In Delhi colorful posters that call Kerala "God's own country" greet you at the airport. In Maharashtra and Goa, brochures for Kerala blanket most hotels and tour offices.

Kerala is, indeed, different from much of India. The state boasts the highest literacy rate in India at nearly 91 percent; India's national average is 74 percent. In 1957, Kerala became the first democratically elected communist government in the world. Today, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) shares power with other political parties in the state, but communism retains a strong foothold in Kerala. Sickle and hammer flags can be spotted in most Keralan cities.

For tourists, the houseboats in Alappuzha hold another draw: escape from the clamor of Indian cities. Houseboats drift through a network of lagoons and lakes, connected by more than 600 miles of canals. A night on a houseboat offers a secluded spot from which to watch wildlife and catch glimpses of the villages that line Kerala's shores.

But before I could see that firsthand, I had to find a boat.

Alappuzha's main drag straddles a wide canal. The street is littered with tourist agencies, juice stands, snack stalls and people huffing to and fro. This is where I began my search.



While many houseboats offer similar services -- the price usually includes about 24 hours on a boat, the crew and meals -- there's a good deal of variety within that setup. Did I want air-conditioning? Room for two people -- or for 10? An overnight or a multiday cruise?

Alappuzha, the most popular spot for houseboats in Kerala, houses hundreds of boats and countless options. Because my travel companion and I visited during high season many of the boats were already taken. But a few stops along the busy street, followed by some calls from our guesthouse, landed a boat.

The next day around noon, we set sail from a small dock behind the boat owner's home. Motoring out to sea, we were surrounded by dozens upon dozens of houseboats. Our crew, two wiry men with smile-lined faces named Rashid and Bishr, served as captain, cook, navigator and tour guides.

We sat on deck and watched the traffic: boats with balconies, multiple bedrooms, and double-decker boats puttered out of the canal alongside us. Sitting in the backwater traffic jam I realized I was surrounded by hotel-boats, not a real houseboat in sight.

The traffic fell away as the boat reached Vembanadu Lake, and by lunch I had forgotten about the congestion of the other boats. We stopped at a little peak of land along the shore and ate a lunch of meen pollichathu (steamed fish), upperis (sauteed vegetables), and rice tossed with shaved coconut. Just before pushing back from shore, Rashid brought out a plate of gooey bananas sauteed in brown sugar.

Four hours of cruising later, we docked next to a village as night swallowed the canal. Our captains threw a plank over the side of the boat, told us they'd be back in time for dinner and crawled ashore.

We did the same.

A dirt pathway stood between the canal, now a simmering black, and a few houses dotting the shoreline. A woman fished for dinner. A young girl scrubbed dirty laundry into submission. Boys scampered along the path. We walked past houses, each one with a tiny Hindu shrine or Christian altar, and heard televisions mumbling, babies gabbing. The whole village smelled like dinner -- a wash of spices and fish.

Back on board, we were greeted by another feast: coconut chutney and pappadums (crispy lentil and chickpea crackers), grilled whole fish smothered in spices, vegetable korma, and a heaping pile of rice. I ate enough pappadums to give me a stomachache, and we finished the meal with a pineapple Rashid and Bishr had brought back from their expedition ashore.

In the morning, we awoke to the sound of the boat leaving the dock and the village behind. In the bright sunlight, I could no longer see the dark houses hidden behind the palms.

Our houseboat cruise was almost over, but Bishr had one more surprise: a turn at the helm. Bishr sat by quietly while we took turns steering the boat, huge grins slapped on our faces.

Back in Alappuzha, we crossed the canal and headed for the bus station.

"Houseboat, houseboat," a man said, rushing over to me.

"I've already been," I told him.

"Oh," he said looking pleased rather than disappointed over losing a commission. "Then you know," he said. I wasn't sure what he thought I knew -- that the trip is worth every rupee, or that backwaters are wild, stunning?

Instead of asking, I just smiled and said, "Yeah, I know."

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