

matt jones

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Toddy, tea and tigers

Matt Jones immerses himself in the Indian state of Kerala's palm-fringed backwaters and journeys into the hills in search of elephants, tigers – and tea.

The 40-watt moon short circuits in flashes of tropical electricity as I head for my houseboat cabin. The first drops of rain pit-pat on its palm frond roof as I notice my right big toe glowing like ET's finger in the darkness. After a few moments it leaves my foot to join the other glowing toes that dart over the surface of Lake Vembanad. Forgetting that there are such things as fireflies, I slump back bemused and vow never to drink coconut toddy again, at least not during this trip into the heart of Kerala's backwaters and lakes.

The 200sq km Lake Vembanad, which stretches from the Indian town of Alleppey (Alappuzha) to Cochin (Kochi), is the largest lake in Kerala, a southern state that, according to legend, was created when Parasuraman, the sixth incarnation of the Hindu Lord Vishnu, stood high in the Western Ghats, cast his axe far into the Arabian Sea and commanded it to retreat.

But the water wasn't completely obedient. Around 1,900km of backwaters remain, earning Alleppey the nickname "Venice of the East", although the surrounding countryside is actually more Holland with a tropical twist.

Locals say that the stone dykes that keep the waters from flooding below sea-level rice paddies and that form canals as busy (or as quiet) as country roads, were built some 50 years ago, after a landlord named Murricken got the idea during a trip to the Netherlands. From a distance, the wooden bridges that rise to salute each passing water bus, rice barge and canoe look like matchstick versions of their counterparts in Amsterdam.

Vembanad, a steamy cocktail of fresh and salt water, decorated with water hyacinth and divers on sticks (they use the poles to swim for shellfish on the bed), is part highway, part bathroom, part kitchen sink.

Boats pull up at its isolated bankside toddy shops so that pink-faced passengers from Hull and Seattle can sample the fermented coconut sap and water concoction that is poured from petrol containers and served with crab, red fish curry and tapioca.

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Vembanad has hosted the colourful Nehru Trophy Boat Race since the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, inaugurated the event in 1952. Held on the second Saturday of August, it features narrow "snake boats" of up to 150 oarsmen each and named for the cobra hood stern.

But for the rest of the year, the lake's Alleppey shore is a starting point for the journey along the palm-fringed backwaters to the town of Kottayam, gateway to the hills, an unforgettable two and a half hours away.

Kottayam may be a backwater in terms of geography, but in socio-economic terms it is not. It was the first town in India to attain total literacy, in 1989, and has been Kerala's newspaper centre since Christian missionary Benjamin Bailey set up a vernacular Malayalam press there in 1820. Today, it's home to India's biggest selling newspaper, *Malayala Manorama*.

The winding road to the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, 117km from Kottayam at Thekkady, begins at the town's ferry port. The road – busy with psychedelic lorries christened in paint with names such as St Stephen and St George – climbs from the paddy fields and coconut groves, past rubber plantations that peter out at 600m above sea level, and into the Cardamom Hills.

There, tea packet scenes come to life on hillsides of tea bushes, neat as Japanese gardens, where basket-backed women pluck a carefully planned crop of two leaves and a bud from each bush every two weeks. Nearly 35,000ha of Kerala's Western Ghats are under tea plantation and the region is noted for its coffee and spices, too.

At 777sq km, the Periyar sanctuary at Thekkady is one of India's largest wildlife reserves. It can be visited at any time of year, but between September and May is best. Its grassland, teak, wild rubber and curry trees, and thick evergreen jungle, are home to wild boar, monkeys, deer, an estimated 47 bears, 260 species of birds and around 2,000 Asian elephants.

The small elephant herds are best viewed in the early morning from boats on man-made Periyar Lake, created when a dam was built in 1895. The lake, the surface of which is broken by the gnarled, arthritic limbs of long dead trees, is the nucleus of the reserve.

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Two lodges, operated by Kerala Tourism Development Corporation, are hidden in foliage on its shore: Aranya Nivas is a colonial stone building at the head of the lake; nearby Lake Palace, reachable only by boat, is the former summer home of the Maharaja of Travancore.

It was the Maharaja who appointed the first game warden, SCH Robinson, in the early part of the 20th century. The forests were turned into a sanctuary in 1934 and declared a tiger reserve in 1978, as part of India's Project Tiger.

A tiger census, carried out by studying paw prints (like handprints, each one is different), is carried out by wardens and game students every December. Of an estimated 5,000 tigers left in existence, 37 are at Periyar, the country's southernmost reserve for the big cats.

Like elephants, tigers are best viewed from the safety of a boat, though with only two or three sightings a year, the chances of seeing one are slight.

Ravi, three years a tracker in the Kiplingesque forests around the Aranya Nivas lodge, saw his first tigers last December.

"You can track an elephant by the smell of its spores," says the 25-year-old, who cuts through the jungle with deceptive ease. "But a tiger has a really pungent odour, like over-ripe fruit, that you can smell from about 30m away.

"I was with a German couple and we saw two on Christmas Day. I told the man and woman to avoid eye contact, as that's when tigers are provoked. Otherwise, they'll keep away from humans.

"Anyway, after about 20 minutes of carefully watching them, the man said, 'Fine, that's two. But where are the other 35?' He wasn't joking either. I think they expected to see a herd."

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