Punting in Paradise

Lesley Synge

Most tourists bound for Kerala arrive directly from Europe. But we two Australians, an aid worker and a writer-activist, start our holiday in northeast India. By mid-January, we’ve worked our way south to the tea and coffee plantations of the Western Ghats where we catch an overnight bus down to the Arabian Sea to tropical Kerala, land of legendary beauty. We’re here to experience the whole landscape. Neither of us has expertise in birdwatching or any other specialty; we’re here to take the opportunity of getting to know this part of our small blue planet.

Kerala is surging with holidaymakers. It’s high tourist season and European and Indians alike are taking advantage of the pleasant mid-winter climate. The tourist trade is worth billions annually to Kerala. The Indian media gloats almost daily about the nation’s ‘fantastic strides’ in tourism, and Kerala is largely responsible. Over eight million tourists spent up big here in 2013, more than seven million of them foreigners, and the annual growth rate is rising dramatically.

We head for Old Kochi, once known as Fort Cochin. From here, the Portuguese, Dutch and British by turn controlled the lucrative East Indian spice trade. Westerners generally find Kerala easy to visit: it leads the Indian nation in its high standards of education and health care; its people are sophisticated and globally aware. Old Kochi offers a brand of hedonism particularly popular with Westerners: Ayurvedic therapies; ‘fusion’ food; kathakali and other classical forms of entertainment; stylish shopping; Arabian Sea sunsets; and – de rigueur – a cruise through the nearby backwaters, the kaayals. Cosmopolitan includes a backwater cruise in its list of top ten Indian Love Nests.

The rational description of the Keralan Wetland eco-system is this: 41 rivers from the Western Ghats feed a labyrinthine network of brackish lakes, canals and lagoons behind the Malabar coastline. Others know it as the work of the gods.

In Old Kochi we find the Keralan backwater cruise industry is booming. Touts try to sign us up, and the choice is clearly between a big noisy houseboat powered by diesel and capable of an extensive tour, or a slow ‘eco-friendly’ boat.

I’m dazed from travel – by taxi, train, plane, rickshaw and auto-rickshaw, on government buses and by foot. All I care to know at this point is that kera is the word for coconut palms. But my travelling companion, Mozzie, is prepared and books with an agent who promises to deliver paradise for a day using manpower alone. The craft is an ex-rice boat, a kettavallum, given a new lease of life as a floating cottage.

A taxi driver collects us at 9am from our room in Old Kochi – reportedly the very room in which the Portuguese maritime hero, Vasco da Gama, breathed his last. (It’s far from the only establishment that dates back to 1524.) We head south to an inland lagoon where our kettavallum-turned-houseboat is moored in front of a small hotel. ‘The most peaceful place in the world,’ the driver says. ‘You will love the next 24 hours of your lives.’

Two barefoot men dressed in white singlets and orange dhotis – a kind of boatman ‘uniform’ – say Namesté and welcome us aboard their long boat. The cook arrives and settles us into the ‘Sir and Madam’ cane armchairs on the bow under a thatched roof.

The boatmen pull anchor and take up long bamboo poles. Butterflies, like the thoughts of joyful four-year-olds, wave us off. Using a combination of muscle strength and the subtle influence of the tides, the moustachioed boatmen – the captain fore, his older mate aft – push
their poles into the earth beneath the water and propel us across the lagoon. Nothing is required of us now except to enjoy. This is Kerala’s contract with us: five thousand rupees (about $90) in exchange for a day in kera paradise.

It’s steamy and green. And quiet. My senses, after a dizzying schedule of Buddhist sites, Hindu temples, ashrams, burning ghats, rajahs’ palaces and more, are so overloaded with India’s famous ‘colour’ and holy and unholy noise that the memory of The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy’s 1997 novel, which is set here, doesn’t enter my mind. (That exquisite and dazzling pleasure awaits me on return home.)

Sir is dressed for sun worship in only a pair of shorts; Madam is avoiding the sun in a long-sleeved Indian shirt and Ghandi-style handloom pants. We stretch out our legs and savour the journey which, as Mozzie’s compass indicates, is going west. Seawards.

‘Too bad about these clumps of water hyacinth,’ I complain, looking around. ‘It’s a weed, isn’t it? Oh good, we’re leaving them behind.’

‘Look ahead,’ says Mozzie, pointing out a cottage with picturesque Chinese-style fishing nets suspended from bamboo poles. The lagoon has narrowed to a canal. ‘Imagine – go fishing without leaving home.’

Trips such as these are designed to avoid the urban landscape but villages, towns and cities belong to the backwaters as surely as the birdlife. After all, rice farmers and fishermen have lived here, sustainably, for millennia. We glide past a village. After a railway bridge, the canal transforms into natural landscape.

‘Wow!’ we exclaim, as we enter a vista of mirrors as far as the eye can see. The aerial coconut palms – hundreds of them lining each side of the glassy way – repeat their perfect designs in still water. Surreal symmetry. It’s as if we’re receiving a lesson from the sages: See: the material world and the illusory world are united as one.

This is why the backwaters are so beloved.

We cut through peacefully, almost soundlessly, the poles entering the khaki waters with barely a splash. The captain aft calls over his dark brown shoulder to his mate in Malayalam. ‘Ha,’ comes the agreeable response. Yes.

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Their world is practical, but we are catapulted smack-bang into the transcendental. (We have, after all, been meditating a lot.)

We sit awed by the visual evidence that, at a philosophical level, there are no dichotomies, no dualities. ‘Now we know why Indian spirituality leads the world,’ Mozzie says philosophically. In a mime of agreement, I extend an arm and curl the perfection into a fist-sized circle, as if my enigmatic gesture explains everything.

Mozzie smiles back, equally enigmatic. And we’re not even stoned.

A startled egret lifts away – a flash of white.

‘Imagine being foolish enough to use drugs here,’ I giggle. ‘The hallucinations would send you over the edge. You’d never cope with the ordinary world again.’

Other kettavallums appear ahead. The boatmen keep discreet distances from each other. Their unspoken agreement: tourists must not be troubled by other touristy presences. Having paid for the privilege of a cook and two boatmen to tend them, they must also feel unique.

The sight of other boats, however, does jolt us out of our transcendental domain into the mundane. ‘The backwaters are silting up,’ Mozzie announces, troubled. ‘They’ve gotta stop the pollution, the reclamation, the construction. The backwaters are shrinking.’

‘Yeah? Where’s this coming from?’

He points to the closest houseboat. One of the young women on board is reading the *Lonely Planet Guide to India*. ‘I read it in *Lonely Planet*.’

‘Yes,’ agrees the cook, who has left lunch preparations to bring us glasses of chai. ‘The canal is becoming less.’

Ahead – another village. Or is it a town? Usually, one would ask what village? what town? and turn on Google Maps, but the backwaters experience invites dislocation and dreaminess. It insists on our surrender to enchantment, and encourages the fantasy that we instantly ‘belong’ to this idyll.

We hear snatches of Bollywood and then devotional songs in Sanskrit, presumably from the village temple.

This village straddles the canal and we see an old man in a battered canoe approaching from the far side of a looming bridge. The canals and waterways have been used for millennia for
transportation, not only for the rice crop but for coir from coconut husks for mattress manufacture. The old man with a bunch of bananas at his feet misjudges the space and finds his craft pinned between kettavallum and bridge pillar. Our captain upbraids him in Malayalam, the language of the Keralite people, sounding, to our ears, like a fast train headed for derailment.

The old man says nothing. Released, he paddles on.

Three men, their bodies submerged to armpit level, exchange greetings with the crew. In English they invite us, ‘Hello, are you swimming?’ I’m keen but the cook quashes the idea. ‘The water … some problems. Not so clean.’ It’s the first indication that the backwaters are not as pristine as they appear.

‘Looks like the bird stretch now,’ Mozzie observes, as we see in quick succession a tree full of crows; a lordly black kite; a wheeling sea eagle; and a line of ducklings, paddling into their futures.

The boatmen decide to pull over. They shove their poles onto the houseboat roof and jump to land with lengths of rope. They twist these over their muscular shoulders and start to pull. It must be easier to tow in this section.

It’s another stretch of surreal symmetry. Again, in our Sir and Madam chairs, we are gobsmacked by the beauty. A kingfisher chirps as it flashes by. Kites and eagles ride invisible thermals.

When they’ve had enough, the men resume punting to cross yet another lagoon. Near the next village they moor. The cook indicates that it’s time for a stroll and the older boatman with the handlebar moustache indicates that he’ll take over in the galley. Perplexed, we trail after the cook and the captain. They’re being deliberately elusive – it enhances the impact of the next vista. The sea! We should have guessed by the muted roar of surf.

The cook smiles and utters the word *Lakshadweep* in Malayalam. *Lakshadweep* mimics the music of the shifting waters on the sand; its majestic onomatopoeia banishes the harsher duo of ‘Arabian Sea’.

Unlike many Indian shorelines which are polluted with the confetti of plastic-bags, this stretch of the Malabar Coast with its light blue waters and pale sand is pristine and enlivened by the technicolour of a fishing fleet. Their daily work is done and the fishermen are selling their catches by the basketful. Overhead, from clanking masts, crows stage raids and wheel off with morsels of silver in their curved beaks. While the captain purchases an ocean fish as a treat for his wife, Mozzie and I wade into the sea. Mozzie’s work in the international aid sector has brought him to the western side of the subcontinent before, but it’s my first glimpse of the Arabian Sea, long-promised since reading the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, a childhood favourite. Its slap-slap-slap is pure romance, delivered, ankle-deep.

We return to the kettavallum and the boatmen take up their poles once more. As we head back to the lagoon we’ve not long left, the aromas of lunch are titillating.

We anchor discreetly near the three other houseboats we’ve played tag with all morning. Here we’re isolated from big boats packed with tourists chugging around and round, never still, never out of sight, spewing tourist garbage and leaving diesel film on the water’s surface.

Keralan home cuisine is indeed as delicious as its legendary status would suggest. As the boat lolls, we enjoy two fish dishes, two vegetable dishes and rice. After fruit salad and glasses of tea, we lounge in our deck chairs while the crew eats. Then, as the boat drifts at anchor and the water sparkles, tourists and transport workers alike nap.

‘That’s it,’ Mozzie announces. ‘We’re heading back east, the same way we came.’

‘So soon? It’s – what? Twoish?’

‘The others are too.’
On the return trip, the boatmen grunt with effort. But they also laugh, sing snatches of songs, and exchange greetings with other boatmen. With single words of English, they point out kingfishers and eagles. We don’t want to burden them with questions or conversation; in the high season they meet new tourists every day, and we’re aware that we’re merely hiring them, not consuming them.

Terns, darters and cormorants seem to have vanished to take siestas but the pushy crows haven’t. Before a canal-dwelling householder can haul up his net, one dives from a coconut palm to snatch up a fish.

Again and again, our eyes are drawn to the boatmen. They’re dignified and manly with outstanding physiques. When they pull over to use their ropes to tow the boat, there’s no hint that they find their work humiliating. Why should they? It’s the noble work of millennia. When they call to each other, they may even be saying, What sort of a poor life would it be without the kaayals?

A canoe piled with sand easily overtakes us but no-one uses motors here; no-one’s in that much of a hurry. A brown and white puppy on the towpath takes a liking to the captain and he mischievously encourages it to waddle after him. Whenever it loses focus and tumbles backwards, he urges it to keep following. When it comes to its senses and turns back for home, the boatman chuckles with pleasure.

The men leap aboard, retrieving their poles from the roof. They plunge them deep into the tricky mud to find contact. And we move. Slow as ever. We’re soon floating through the beautiful glassy place of transcendent reality and bright green kera fronds in duplicate. The neat black shape of a swallow floats back and forth on one frond (on one-yet-two fronds). Semi-hypnotised, I note the swallow’s shape (its one-yet-two) and the colours of the nuts. They reflect to infinity: some green, some khaki, some golden. In five days’ time, when we cross to the opposite side of the Indian peninsula, ready to fly home from Chennai, we’ll meet a mock-glamorous transvestite (hijra) in a cheap yellow sari at a beachside coconut drink stall. For fun, she’ll sensuously fondle the stall’s kera nuts. For now, in Kerala, there’s no narrative – neither past, present or future. My mind’s in a zone of neutral perception: black swallow; oval nuts of green, khaki and gold. Black. Green. Khaki. Gold. In mirrored duplication.

Perception: pure and simple.

From boatman to boatman – long quavered riffs of Malayalam.

The mid-afternoon torpor lifts and a late afternoon zest sashays in. A kingfisher on a wire preens. A fifteen-duck family crosses the canal. In an untidy nest of random sticks, two crows mate.

‘Did you know crows mate for life, Mozzie?’
‘Hmmm,’ he returns, still sleepy.

‘Tiffin!’ we echo, smitten by this marvellous Anglo-Indian word for snacks. Today it’s French fries and chai. On the bank, a tethered goat munches weeds.

In ‘the bird stretch’ we see crakes and cormorants. Then three men with lines; a man on a bike ringing his bell; a woman walking on the towpath in a sparkling red sari – the village with the railway bridge is coming.

Before we slip under it, we pass a hall with a red flag with hammer and sickle flying. It’s said that Kerala has four religions: Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Marxism-Leninism. Certainly, whatever other objections might be raised – and Arundhati Roy does so with gusto – the democratically-elected Marxist state government of Kerala has helped to eradicate the grossest
inequalities that a rigid Hindu caste system usually leaves unchallenged. The populous underclass of beggars and outcasts, so obvious elsewhere, is not to be seen in Kerala. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) claims credit.

‘The hyacinth again,’ I say resentfully as we enter the home lagoon. The cook tells us that the weed washes back and forth with the tide, chased by the salt. It’s a metaphor for the world we must return to: unsatisfying, problematic, unmanageable, obtuse and oblivious.

‘It’s silting up, all the time,’ Mozzie worries again. ‘These backwaters. Reducing all the time.’

We anchor, mid-lagoon, because our day in paradise is not over yet. It’s hot, but how can it be otherwise ten degrees north of the equator? Across the glaring water, we observe the small resort and the jetty from where we departed this morning. The captain invites us to have a go at punting.

Mozzie good-naturedly gives it a shot, almost losing his shorts in the effort. The boatman’s expertise clearly eclipses that of any white guy who chooses to play along. You’d have to wonder if the boatman is entertaining the tourists, or the other way round.

The sunlight dances and the water is silver and the hyacinth comes floating in black clumps on the tide. It’s bright, too bright, as the sun departs for Madagascar. But it’s peaceful enough and whenever a breeze wafts our way, it brings temple music.

The captain calls it a day in Malayalam and pulls anchor. I want to whine like a child, *Oh noooooo*. A lone cormorant on its small floating hyacinth island abandons it as we pass. We tie up, Mozzie tips the crew and they depart. (In the morning we learn that the captain has slept on the stern of the boat to protect it. It’s not his, it’s his master’s, but he considers it his.) We move our chairs further forward to the wooden planking of the prow to watch the night fall. Except to eat and to use the Western-style toilet in the bedroom, we’ve barely moved from our chairs all day.

‘We’ve done *some* work today: the work of resting,’ I say to justify our indulgence. ‘Resting. Don’t discount it. Who knows what power this day will unleash … when the time comes.’

I could go on – we need this beauty, this absence of mobile phones, this womb-like, parasitic nurturing – but Mozzie’s on a different train of thought. ‘If no action is taken, this place will go the same way of Lake Dal in Srinagar.’ He’s holidayed twice on Kashmiri houseboats. The degradation of that body of water haunts him.

The lagoon quietens further except for some men in canoes who row out to unfurl their nets. A great flock of birds flies over in a waving motion, its shape also mimicking the wings of a bird. A bird body in the body of a bird, heading east into moonrise. Their flight is strange and
beautiful, an aerial Arabic cuneiform. The sight underlines the uniqueness of the eco-system we’re privileged to be in because such a sight – once so common all over the globe – is now rare. The magic of our small planet is still alive here.

Unknown birds call and a cuckoo intones oo0 oo0 oo0 oo0 as the khaki water turns slate. A short-lived breeze blows lines of silver ripples across the smooth dark surface. Loudspeaker devotional music lifts up simultaneously, as if on cue: sacred soundtrack.

Sun’s gone. A flock of cormorants fly south. A fisherman lights his torches. The small hotel we’re moored near provides a candlelit dinner of prawns masala, bindi, potato, dhal and coriander, and rice... as delicious as the midday lunch. As we eat, the breeze delivers an insistent percussion. ‘Festival night,’ explains the waiter. ‘Local temple.’

My eyebrows arch meaningfully at Mozzie: up anchor and punt on over?

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Mozzie says lazily. The practical versus the poetic. The balance between us.

The hidden moon sends messages: nothing doing little humans, enjoy the dark. Then all of a sudden the night’s not dark. Sneaky orange moon. Jumping up like a fish. Not just any moon – full moon. All night there’ll be two of them, one bobbing in grey cloud, one mocking it from the dark water. Orange moon. Orange moon.

We read a little. Fall asleep with the gentlest of rocking, and temple music. If the moon turns silver before it too flies to Madagascar, we don’t see it.

It’s eight. How did we sleep in? After doing nothing?

During the night, the tango of freshwater and seawater has caused an influx of water hyacinth. Methodical, determined, eerily silent, it’s colonised the lagoon and surrounded the boat.

‘Don’t worry, it will move across to the other side,’ the waiter from the small hotel soothes when he brings breakfast.

While we eat, we hear a mosque summoning its faithful to prayer. Then – Baaaaang! Gunshot. Armed conflict? But it can’t be. Not here. The waiter who is removing the breakfast plates again reassures us: ‘Temple festival finished. Firecrackers, ha!’

‘Double-bangers, eh,’ observes Mozzie. ‘Not the revolution, but Shiva worship.’

We don’t want to leave the backwaters but we must. The next couple is booked in for Dreamboat Therapy and we know the jazz: tourists must feel an exclusive ownership of paradise for a day. The bicep-blessed boatmen with their black moustaches and orange dhotis liked us and we liked them, but they’ve got two new tourists to prepare for now. Their pair and ours smile; the eight palms of our hands fold and we intone Namesté. Then Sir and Madam are whisked off.

At home in Brisbane I rediscover on a bookshelf The God of Small Things. I remember now: it’s one of the most furious novels ever written. Roy is famous for her lacerating criticisms of ‘Mother India’, especially about caste. In more recent times, on the internet, it’s more about destruction of environment. By night I reread the novel; by day I google ‘Kerala backwaters’. Can’t let the magic go

Buried behind marketing sites aimed at tourists, I discover scientific papers and warnings: on the verge of an environmental catastrophe: drastic restoration needed. The government of India has signed an international convention that obliges it to protect these fragile Wetlands and the state government of Kerala has appointed a Wetland Management Committee. There’s work to do but grass-root activists appear to be grinding their teeth about the slowness of the pace.

For millennia, they point out, farmers, fishermen and boatmen have managed this environment. Between the tenth and twentieth centuries, despite the brutality of European power
play (in which Vasco da Gama played his part), the backwater eco-system flourished. The ecosystem people, as one writer dubs the humble denizens of the backwaters, tended it as the politics of the day ebbed and flowed. Tended. Activists say that caste-ridden Indian society is not consulting with such people as it should. It could learn from them.

Here in the southern hemisphere, I’m suddenly anxious. Will the backwaters survive? The Rough Guide to Kerala, that other ‘tourist Bible’, notes that there are four Malayalam words in the English language: catamaran, coir, copra and teak. I wonder if the ecosystem people will add any new words during the complex political struggle which is enveloping them now like a perfect storm. Perhaps one word is Nikkoo! (Stop!). Stop the diesel-powered boats. Nikkoo!

Within my anxiety I feel a moment of intense relief: by choosing a kettavallum, we did not add to the urgent work of conservation; we did no harm.

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