



Indian Spice and Colour

The West Coast of India has some marvellous sights to delight the curious traveller, and a subtle use of spices makes for distinctive, delicious cuisine, writes Carolyn Lockhart.

Welcome to India ... you will find some very funny things here," says a smiling young Indian businessman as I disembark in Ahmedabad, the major city of Gujarat. This state is not such a well-known tourist destination as its high profile neighbour Rajasthan, but I'd been told it is just as colourful and just as photogenic. Gujarat was the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi and his Ashram headquarters are now a National Monument. The state is also home to some rare animals, such as the wild ass and the Asian lions that once roamed over much of India.

a dozen or more dishes of variously spiced vegetables with an array of flat breads, pickles and condiments.

On the road

Our three-day itinerary in Gujarat is organised by local specialist company North West Safaris. We have a comfortable air-conditioned car with a cheerful English-speaking driver-guide. Gopal negotiates the frightening traffic with such skill that we soon relax and concentrate on the fascinating glimpses of colourful life that we pass on the road.

The terrifying car ride from the airport is a taste of more to come on this trip and it's a relief to reach the Courtyard Marriott where I am staying. The hotel is a calm international oasis in this chaotic city, although goats wandering among the smart cars parked outside rather spoil the modern image.

Women labour on building sites or go about humble tasks looking improbably graceful in classic saris. Tiny open buses painted with flowers are crammed with women and girls, every one of them dressed in a different vibrant colour or pattern. "They are going to a wedding" our driver tells us. They smile and wave as we pass. We follow an elephant on the highway tootling happily along in the back of a sturdy open truck. He eyes us beadily as we pass.

The Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, housing one of the world's finest collections of Indian fabrics and costumes, is well worth a visit. Its opening hours are erratic though, so it's wise to check in advance.

At a busy roadside spice market, women wrapped in pink and turquoise sit in the dust beside piles of red chillies removing the seeds.

Gujarati cuisine is vegetarian but varied and quite delicious. No wonder the respected international food writer Madhur Jaffrey calls it "the haute cuisine of vegetarianism."

Men feed pungent orange tumeric and other spices into primitive grinding machinery. Everyone we encounter is friendly and quite happy to be photographed. We never see any beggars or tourist trinket sellers.

The famous Gujarati Thali combines



01 Philipkutty's Farm on an island in Vembanad Lake in Kerala
 02 Storybook minaret, part of Vazir's Mausoleum in Junagadh
 03 Young girl at festival in Gujarat
 04 Typical houseboats on the backwaters of Kerala

Palaces, peacocks and lions

By evening we are driving under the arched gates of the princely town of Gondal. The Orchard Palace Hotel is one of several palaces in the area owned by a royal family. This small hotel has an air of shabby chic with its original 1930s furniture, collection of random treasures and family portraits. The present Maharaja HH Jyotendra Sinhji lives next door in another palace with his personal railway station in the grounds. Dozens of peacocks roam the neglected gardens and hotel guests are invited to view the large collection of splendid vintage and modern cars many of them custom-made. The next morning we head for Sasan Gir National Park, famous for being the last refuge of the Asiatic Lion. Accommodation nearby varies from simple villas in a mango orchard to a Taj Hotel and the Fern Forest Resort surrounded by lush gardens and water features that make it an appealing place to stay in this dry forest landscape.

On an early morning safari into the park we are thrilled to spot a pair of magnificent lions dozing under trees. They seem larger and paler than their African cousins. The park is also home to various types of deer and many birds but it's the rare lions that most people come here to see. We return by road to Ahmedabad to the take short flights south to Mangalore via Mumbai.

History shaped by spices

Kerala is famous for the exotic spices that have lured foreign seafarers and traders since ancient times. Portuguese, Dutch, English, Chinese and Jewish settlements have all left their legacies as well as the disciple St Thomas who founded a strong Syrian Christian community here just after the death of Jesus Christ. Today Christians, Muslims and Hindus live in harmony with one another, each with their own colourful festivals and individual spicy cuisines based on the ubiquitous rice, coconut, bananas and fish.

We are fortunate in having Dravidian Trails, the experienced travel operators based in Cochin, to organise our

transport and accommodation.

In just over a week we have a good sampler of the exciting and varied experiences available in Kerala: an Ayurvedic Resort, a houseboat and four different home stays, all of them renowned for their authentic local cooking.

Neeleshwar haven

Our first stop is Neeleshwar Hermitage, a resort on the Arabian Sea known for its Ayurvedic treatments and delicious, healthy food. Dr. Suma, the hotel's Ayurvedic doctor, recommends herbal treatments, diet tips to benefit my body type and a massage. This is possibly the best massage of my life. The therapist even follows me into the shower for a brisk scrubbing down with tumeric paste. Tumeric seems to be the wonder spice de jour that will prevent many ills, and here we drink it in warm water at breakfast and discover it enhances many dishes at every meal.

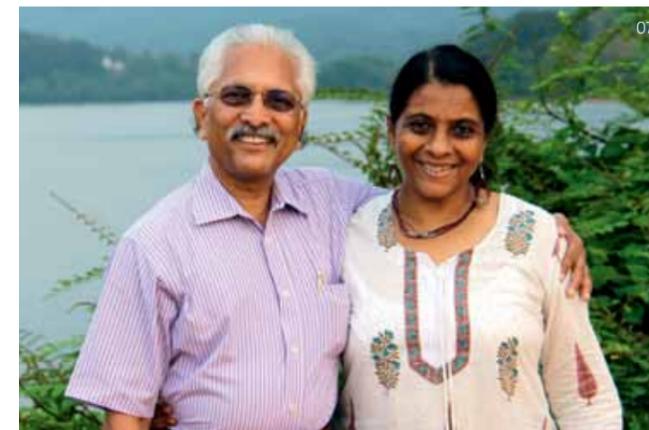
The Hermitage has recently acquired its own houseboat, the Lotus, built in the



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traditional rice-barge style with two self-contained cabins. We cruise 'the tongued backwaters of Malabar' with an attentive crew of four.

Home stays

Kerala has a well-developed network of accredited home stay establishments.

It's quite a different experience from a glossy hotel and I must admit that I was a little sceptical at first. However, our hosts were all cultivated and interesting people, as well as excellent home cooks so that meals were certainly a highlight.

Spacious bedrooms had separate dressing rooms and quite modern bathrooms, although they tended to be a little austere by Australian standards. All had wi-fi connections.

Ayesha Manzil

Hosts C.P. Moosa and his wife Faiza Moosa welcome us to their rambling 1862 heritage property built on a cliff above the sea near Tellicherry.

Lunch is ready on the veranda and they urge us to hurry so that we might catch one of the last Theyyam Hindu rituals of the season in a nearby village. We are the only foreigners watching as elaborately costumed red-painted dancers whip themselves into a religious trance.

Faiza, a renowned cook, inherited her recipes from her Muslim ancestors. Australian chef and author Christine Manfield has devoted many pages to Ayesha Manzil in her glossy new book *Tasting India*.

That evening Faiza presents us with a splendid array of dishes in their dining pavilion under the stars.

The next morning we depart by train for Thodupzha. A potentially stressful experience made easy by the solicitous driver who delivers us to us to our air-conditioned carriage then arranges for a kind fellow passenger to make sure we get off at the right station.

Tabernacle

Dr Thomas Joseph and Mrs Ruby Thomas Edayady embrace us warmly as we arrive at their comfortable home in an affluent suburb of this small city.

Their terraced garden planted with spice and fruit trees steps down to a clear river. Ruby gives us a cooking demonstration before we sit down to a magnificent dinner. She is a truly excellent cook and her colourful array of Syrian Christian dishes is extraordinary.

Thomas and Ruby are the most generous of hosts. They take us on an afternoon drive to a tranquil lake and into the hills to see rubber, spice and tapioca plantations. An early morning boat ride enables us to see life on their river.

05 Girls on their way to a wedding in Gujarat

06 Fresh produce at a roadside market

07 Dr Thomas Joseph and Mrs Ruby Thomas Edayady of Tabernacle Home Stay

08 The Orchard Palace Hotel in Gondal, Gujarat

Feeling like old friends we depart the next day armed with recipes and Ruby's gifts of a huge bag of aromatic peppercorns and a special pan for making the delicate lace-rimmed pancakes called paalappam. We promise to return soon.

Vanilla County

Plantations of vanilla, pepper, coffee and rubber surround this rather grand country bungalow. My large room has a terrace (with hammock) overlooking tropical gardens. Baby and Rani Mathew are experienced hosts and they make us feel very welcome. Rani takes us, along with the few other guests, to see how rubber is harvested and processed. She shows us the different spice plants and also demonstrates how the bark or seeds or fruits are prepared. Later we take a country walk to a swimming hole in a crystal clear stream. There's a cooking demonstration before yet another sumptuous dinner.

Philipkutty's Farm

Our driver delivers us to the edge of wide, tidal Vembanad Lake where a wooden boat waits to take us to the productive organic farm and home stay. Philipkutty's Farm is a must on the dedicated foodie's map. Rick Stein was here recently filming for a new series. Canals divide the banana, cacao and coconut groves under-planted with spicebushes. Ducks swim in canals that also hold fish and giant prawns. Chickens scratch in the rich vegetable gardens.

We stay in one of the private waterfront villas facing the lake. Pots of bright bougainvillea edge the path leading to the main house and outdoor dining room. The farm is owned and run by matriarch Aniassa Philip, aka 'Mummy', and her daughter-in-law, Anu.

Charming Cochin

Our final destination is the elegant boutique hotel Tissa's Inn, decorated with



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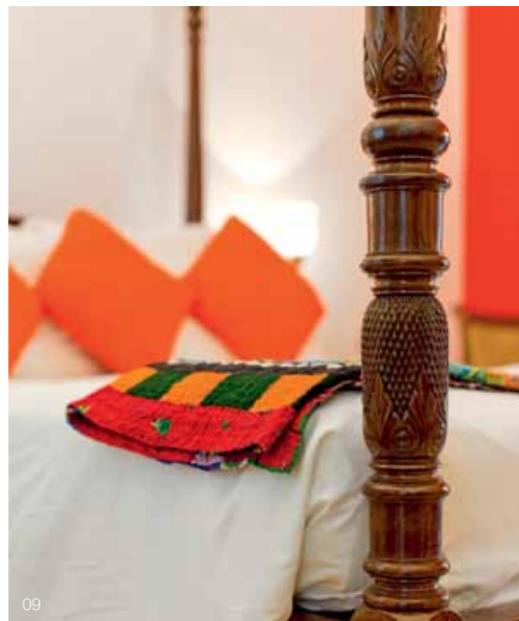
07 Traditional character at Theyyam Hindu rituals
08 Local seafood at Tissa's Inn, Cochin
09 Bedroom at Malabar House, Cochin
10 Top deck of the Lotus Houseboat



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11 Malabar House in Cochin
12 Roadside spice market, Gujarat



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interesting antique pieces. Old Cochin has Dutch and Portuguese churches, colonial cemeteries and the Pardesi Synagogue. Explorer Vasco da Gama died in Cochin in 1524 and although his body was eventually returned to Portugal, his original tomb can be seen in the church of St Francis. The spectacular Chinese fishing nets take several men to operate them and look like giant modern sculptures despite being designed in the time of Kubla Khan. There are several unique and stylish restaurants to choose from, such as Malabar Junction in the courtyard of the luxurious Malabar House.

It's always nice to take a little something home from a holiday, so it was a joy to discover that Cochin has excellent shopping with many reputable antique dealers such as Crafter's Antiques. We filled our suitcases with soft quilts and cool cotton tops and dresses.

Every day brings with it a new adventure in India. If you go with an open mind and an eye for colour and detail, then you will have truly marvellous experiences. Gujarat and Kerala are just two of India's 28 states. I can't wait to discover some of the others. ●

Getting There: Singapore Airlines has regular flights from Australia via Singapore to many cities in India, including Ahmedabad and Cochin, www.singaporeair.com **Tour:** Gujarat, North West Safaries, www.northwestsafaries.com; Kerala, Dravidian Trails, www.dravidiantrails.in **Gujarat Tourism:** www.gujarattourism.com; **Kerala Tourism:** www.keralatourism.com **Stay:** Courtyard Marriott Ahmedabad, www.marriott.com; Orchard Palace Hotel, www.gondalpalaces.com; The Fern, www.ferngirforestresort.com; Neeleshwar Hermitage, www.neeleshwarhermitage.com; Ayesha Manzil, www.ayishamanzil.com/ Tabernacle: www.tabernaclehomestay.com; Vanilla County: www.vanillacounty.in; Philipkutty's Farm: www.philipkuttysfarm.com; Tissa's Inn: www.tissasinn.com Malabar Junction: www.malabarhouse.com