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THE SUNDAY TIMES

TRAVEL

IT'S ALL YOURS

The all-inclusive package holiday goes luxury



WHY BABIES AND PLANES DON'T MIX

Matt Rudd writes an open letter to Kate, Wills and little George | p5

A SUMMER HOLIDAY IN MAY

Short breaks on the Med with sunshine guaranteed | p6

WIN FIVE NIGHTS IN THE MALDIVES

An escape for two is up for grabs in our Where Was I? competition | p23



SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
See a slideshow of Francesca's
snaps from the backwaters of Kerala
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Calm down, here Boating on Kerala's smooth waters; below, a man taking part in theyyam, a Hindu ritual



singer belting out Céline Dion — as well as nature walks and safaris (vythiriresort.com; doubles from £85, half-board). We sign up for a day with an outfit called Muddy Boots (muddyboots.in) and set off on mountain bikes through neat lines of green tea bushes.

Our guide, Jude, tells us that Wayanad is home to 203 bird species, 45 varieties of mammal and 148 kinds of butterfly, at which point I'm distracted by a giant dog scratching itself in the upper branches of a fig tree. It turns out to be a Malabar squirrel, said to be the biggest in the world.

Later, we clamber up boulders, avoiding elephant dung, swim in waterfalls and, just as the sun reaches roaring point, break for a *sadya* lunch — a vegetarian feast of pickles and curries served on a banana leaf — at Pranavam Homestays, where the retired owners' take on Kerala life, arranged marriages and the caste system is as fascinating as their exotic garden (pranavahomestays.com; doubles from £38, B&B).

Back in Cochin, we meet a trio of teenagers wearing

Seven largely naked, pot-bellied men are being stitched into mirrored costumes

beads and braids, drinking champagne to toast the end of their gap year. They'd stuck to the south of Kerala and were intrigued to hear about the north. Everything we told them elicited the same word of approval: "Chilled." I couldn't have put it more succinctly myself.

THE BRIEF

Francesca Angelini was a guest of Audley (01993 838355, audleytravel.com), which has a 10-day trip taking in Nileswarem, the northern backwaters, the Lotus cruise, Wayanad, Tellicherry and Cochin from £2,450pp, including some meals and flights. A 14-day trip, excluding the Lotus but including the southern backwaters, starts at £2,340pp.

Four more new Indian frontiers

WEST BENGAL Few have explored the downstream reaches of the Ganges, a 250-mile stretch between Patna and Farakka that is a treasure trove of temples and jungle-covered Mughal palaces. A new river cruiser, the Rajmaha, has opened up this part of the holy river, offering nine-day luxury cruises. Book one with Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111, greavesindia.co.uk), which has packages from £2,170pp, including flights.

KASHMIR The Himalayan paradise has reopened for business, allowing today's travellers to see what all those hippies were raving about. Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontierstravel.com) has the Garden of the Moghul Kings tour, with a cruise from Dal Lake to Walur Lake, walking in the foothills and loafing on houseboats in Srinagar. The 11-day trip departs on June 12 and starts at £2,495pp, including flights.

THE SUNDARBANS The largest tropical mangrove forest on earth has been so tricky to penetrate that tiger numbers have always been best guesses, though they're said to be the highest of any reserve in India. The government has established a tiger sanctuary and is encouraging the intrepid to visit. Travel the Unknown (020 7183 6371, traveltheunknown.com) has seven nights, departing on November 1, from £1,595pp, including flights.

MEGHALAYA In India's wettest state, in the far northeast, you'll need rain and raging torrents to appreciate the wonder of living bridges. For centuries, farmers in Cherrapunji have encouraged *Ficus elastica* roots to cross rivers, creating bridges strong enough to be paved with stone. One even has two decks: one for cows, one for people. Transindus (0844 879 3960, transindus.co.uk) has a 12-day tailor-made trip from £2,365pp, including flights.



The backwaters' backwater

Francesca Angelini takes the slow boat to northern Kerala, India's new capital of chill

Thwhack. I'm jolted awake from my nap. Thwhack. Undeterred, our houseboat carries on chugging along the palm-fronted backwaters. Thwhack. I make out a cluster of men wobbling as they stand up in their kayaks. Obviously

Brits abroad after one too many Kingfisher beers, I think. But, as my sun-addled brain kicks in, I remember that this is Vallyaparamba, a little-known backwater of northern Kerala, where I haven't seen a red-faced tourist in days. The culprits are in fact fishermen smacking the water with giant paddles.

For 20 years, Kerala has been a hotspot for tourists seeking laid-back tropical paradise. The standard drill is to head south from Cochin to Alleppey, whose waterways are jammed with tourist boats, then down to the congested beaches of Varkala and Kovalam, where unregulated development has brought sprawling resorts, pizza joints and many a hippie in fisherman's trousers.

Kerala's more Muslim north, home to Vallyaparamba's quiet waters, has more to offer — deserted beaches, misty mountains, streams, rivers, tea plantations, ayurvedic massages, tigers, monkeys and elephants — but hardly any tourists to enjoy it.

So, landing in Cochin, my boyfriend and I head north immediately. After four hours on the timeless joy that is an Indian train, we reach Tellicherry, a former colonial trading port, whose peppercorns are found in

British supermarkets. It is home to some of Kerala's finest home cooking, thanks to Faiza Moosa. From her 1860s house overlooking the Arabian Sea, Faiza runs a homestay with her husband, CP Moosa, who claims to have brought the home-stay concept to Kerala (ayishamanzil.com; doubles from £80, full-board).

At 7.30am every day, Moosa takes guests to the market, where fishermen throw water onto flapping gills and crouch to debarb mussels. He is also keen that we experience the *theyyam*, a Hindu ritual unique to northern Kerala. So we set off to a remote village, where a lucky few residents are to be transmogrified into gods. Seven largely naked, pot-bellied men are being painted orange and stitched into 3ft-wide peacock-like mirrored costumes. Women queue to tell them their secrets and slip them banknotes, then frenzied dancing ensues.

When it's time to relax again, we head to the backwaters of Vallyaparamba for a

night on the Lotus, decked out in teak, with two huge bedrooms and marble bathrooms (thelotuskerala.com; doubles from £170, all-inclusive). There's little to do but soak up the sun and gaze out as children hop off school buses and women hand washing beside gaudy villas.

Kerala's best beaches are, you've guessed it, also in the north. On a palm-fronted stretch of sand, empty of everything but scuttling crabs, hungry dogs and the occasional cow, is the Neeleshwar Hermitage, a luxury ecolodge made up of thatched fishermen's cottages (neeleshwarhermitage.com; doubles from £95). The in-house spa doctor

specialises in ayurveda. I am told that milky coffee, fried foods and massages are good for me, and heavy exercise is not. I spend two days adhering to this advice, mainly lying catatonic by the pool, and feel transformed.

So much so that I decide to test out some more adventurous activities. High in the Western Ghat mountains, Vythiri Resort offers hot tubs in treehouses, giant buffets, thieving monkeys and a local



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