

UNDISCOVERED LANDS IN WELL DISCOVERED COUNTRIES

Kerala – Getting away from the hustle and bustle and stepping into the serenity of God's own country

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A S A CRICKET LOVING AUSSIE, my life growing up longed for the long, hot summers where I'd hopefully spend hours in the middle making lots of runs for my team.

If I wasn't playing I'd be watching the test matches on television or listening on the radio. That was what my summer was about.

During the rest of the year it was a bit more difficult to follow the cricket. Remember, I was a child before pay television and the internet. The only way to follow overseas cricket in the 1980's was by listening to the radio.

The natural instinct of most cricketers is to be in awe of cricket in England and English cricket grounds because of the history of both cricket and Empire. While an English summer of cricket seems magical it was another country that I wanted to play cricket in. I didn't want little villages with white picket fences, I wanted cricket in the streets and cricket in the fields. I was drawn to another land. India.

Every story that comes from Australian cricketers, in their interviews and autobiographies, always talks about the crushing congestion of busy streets wherever you go.

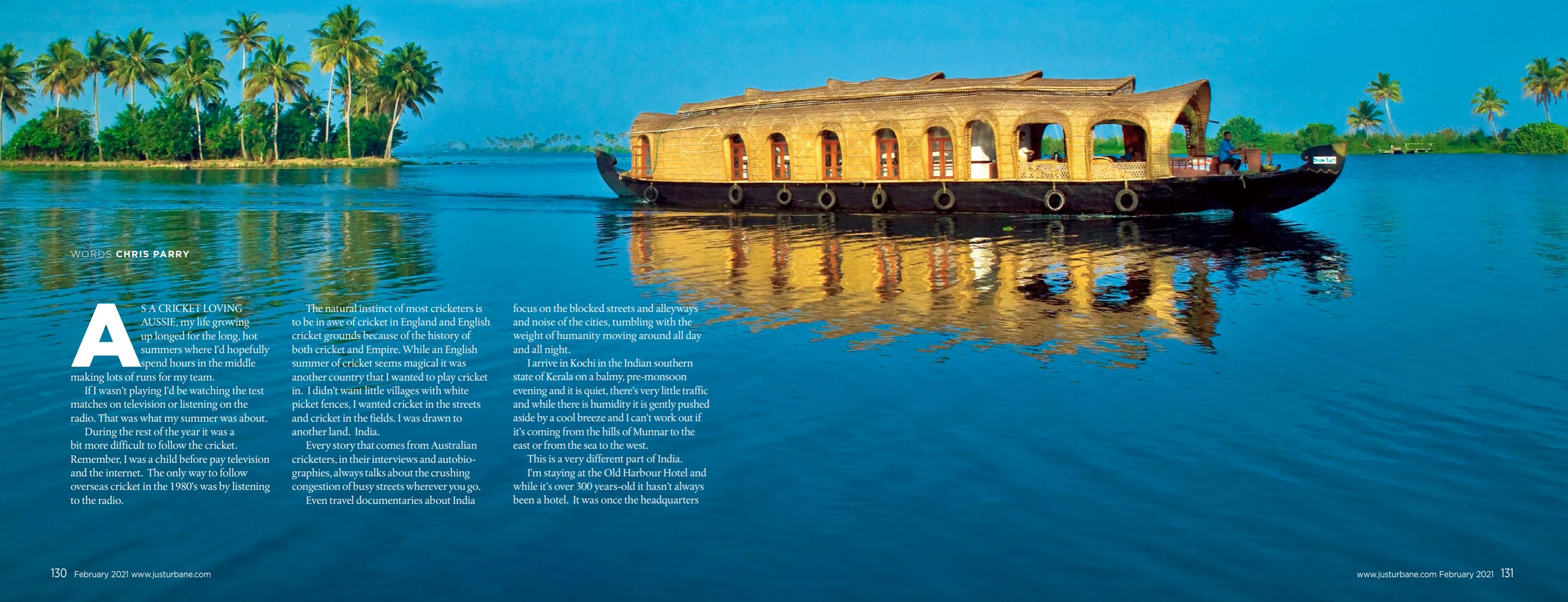
Even travel documentaries about India

focus on the blocked streets and alleyways and noise of the cities, tumbling with the weight of humanity moving around all day and all night.

I arrive in Kochi in the Indian southern state of Kerala on a balmy, pre-monsoon evening and it is quiet, there's very little traffic and while there is humidity it is gently pushed aside by a cool breeze and I can't work out if it's coming from the hills of Munnar to the east or from the sea to the west.

This is a very different part of India.

I'm staying at the Old Harbour Hotel and while it's over 300 years-old it hasn't always been a hotel. It was once the headquarters





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in Kerala for the Dutch East India Company before it was used as accommodation for English tea plantations before falling into disrepair for many years. Situated just a hop, skip and a jump from Mahatma Gandhi Beach, fresh food markets and the Chinese Fishing Nets, the Old Harbour Hotel has that sense of charm and luxury of empire while being a great choice if you want to walk to all of the attractions of Fort Kochi.

Breakfast in the morning is served in the garden by the pool and with over 500 bird species in Kerala. I think most of them have gathered to sing to me as I tuck in to a big plate of appam, a south Indian rice batter and coconut pancake, and a spicy chickpea kadala curry.

While the beaches, markets and fishing provide wonderful opportunities, particularly at sunset, to just relax and



watch the waterside activities, I want to head into the streets of Fort Kochi. I'm expecting everything I've ever heard and read about walking the streets of India. The crush of the crowds! The pushing and shoving! The noise of traffic and people all getting in each other's way!

This is a very different part of India.

As I literally walk down the middle of the roads, streets and alleyways I occasionally get the tinkling of a bell from a cyclist and on one occasion I help an old man push a cart that is blocking traffic (three tuk tuks I think).

I wander up alleyways, following the sense of aromatic spices like turmeric, ginger and iced cold Coca-Cola because it's getting so hot.

I take a rest in St Francis Church, which is India's oldest European church, walk down Bishops House Road which is a beautiful reminder of the influence of the Portuguese,

Dutch and British on the architecture and food culture in this area.

As you meander and mooch your way through Fort Kochi you will discover that amongst the cafes, restaurants, churches and synagogues are beautiful local art galleries and textile shops that are easy to browse through.

This is a very different part of India.

My next adventure in Kerala requires me to travel a bit further south, but still within the state of Kerala. I'm heading for the world-renowned splendour of the Allepey Backwaters. Often described as the 'Venice of the East' I think it should be the other way around. Venice should have to describe itself as the 'Allepey of the West'.

That wonderful book, 'The Wind in The Willows', has that most dreamy of quotes to describe being on the water in English



THE HOUSEBOATS ARE CALLED KETTUVALAMS. THEY ARE LUXURIOUS AND MOST APPEAR TO BE AIR-CONDITIONED

canals, "There's nothing quite like messing about in boats."

I would add to that by saying wherever I go, "Get me on a boat." Not quite as whimsical as the other quote but I hope you get my meaning. I love boats. Any shape, any size, anywhere.

If you love boats then get onto the Alleppey Backwaters. As you slowly putt-putt along you realise you are passing by neighbourhoods on both banks of the canal. You can wave, blow your horn or just watch as the life on the banks unfolds before your eyes. Old men are discussing the problems of the world, children are throwing sticks into the water for dogs to retrieve and women trying to wash clothes are getting wet by shaking dogs that emerge triumphantly from the river, stick in mouth.

I pull into a little shop by the side of the canal and enjoy a cool drink as I make friends with one of the locals, a crested goshawk, who decides to perch on my shoulder and watch at me closely. I'm glad I'm not a mouse.

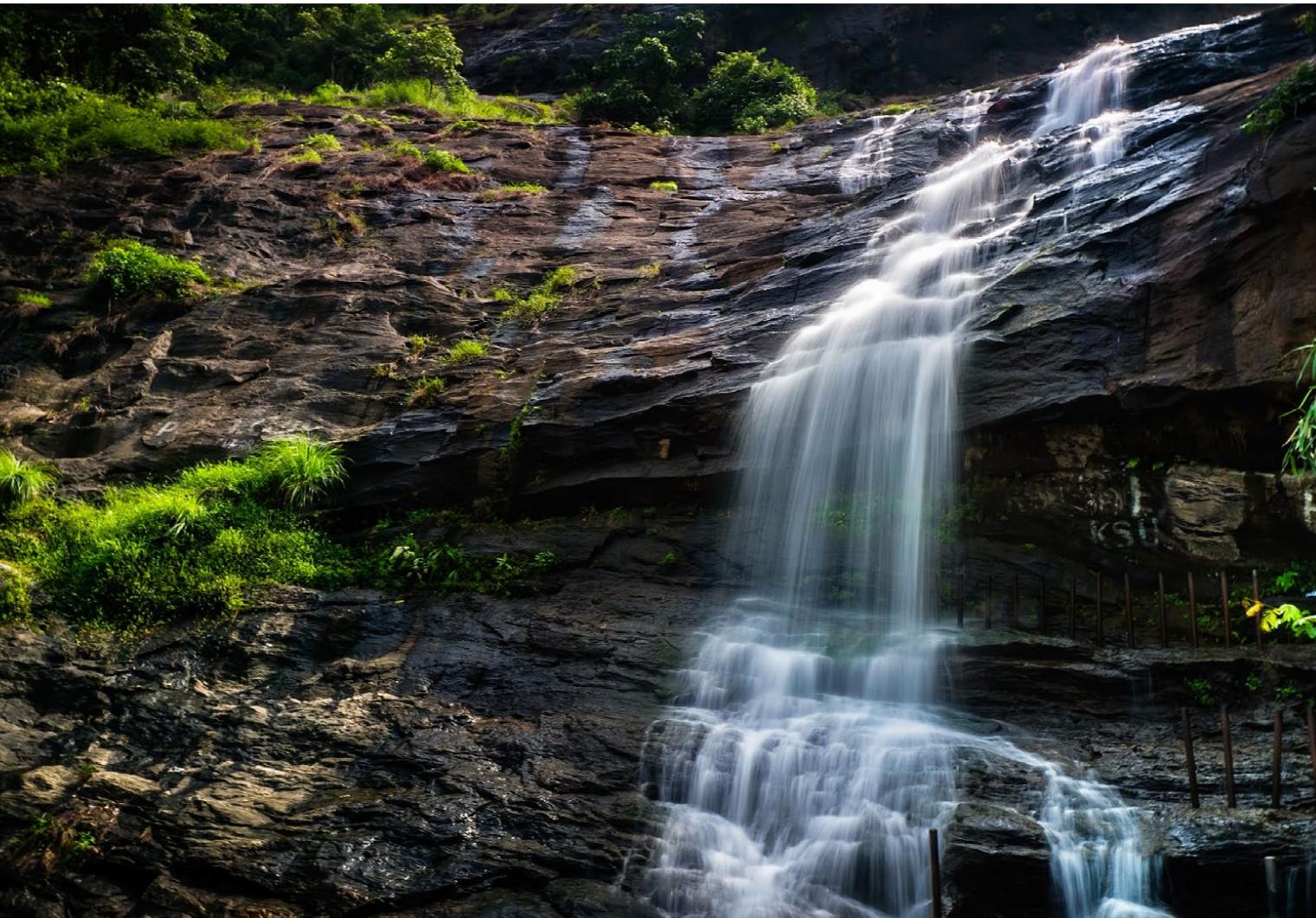
This network of interconnected canals and river systems are over 900 kilometres

long. They are naturally occurring and have been created by tides, currents and waves. It's one of India's most popular getaway destinations and this is evident by the size of the houseboats that chug past me. These houseboats are called kettuvallams and most started life as grain barges until transporting tourists became more profitable than transporting grain. Some are very luxurious and most appear to be air-conditioned and great billows of smoke erupt from the stern of many of these boats as barbeques prepare the next meal for those onboard.

On the backwaters, every boat has room to move and when you pack to start your Alleppey getaway make sure you leave your watch at home. You don't need to know the time at any time when life is as gloriously slow as this.

This is a very different part of India. As I tie up my boat and step ashore, I leave behind the Alleppey Backwaters for my next destination, the hills of Munnar.

A long, winding and ascending road is as close as I get to traffic congestion in Kerala but with many waterfalls along the way to



ESCAPE PLAN:
Covid-19: International flight opportunities are not likely to resume until halfway through 2021. Movement control restrictions are in place in India and it is advised to check with police and health authorities before travelling.

GETTING THERE:
When international flights resume there are regular route options from Australia to Kerala via Kuala Lumpur on Air Asia. In India there are regular domestic flights to Kochi from Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Nagpur, Thiruvananthapuram and Chennai. For a more picturesque and slower journey, try a direct train to Kerala from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore or Kolkata. If you decide a road trip to Kerala is your choice of travel, enjoy tea and banana plantations along the way and lots of Instagram worthy stops at waterfalls and jungle views. Support local villages along the way by purchasing refreshments and food.

stop and cool the feet, it doesn't feel that long before I pass through Munnar (stopping to buy the best quality tiffins I've ever seen) and arrive at the Fog Resort and Spa, with views overlooking both jungle clad mountains and tea plantation hills.

I wake in the morning to the much promised and anticipated resort experience and it doesn't disappoint. As the sun and temperature rise, so too does the fog that has settled overnight in the surrounding gullies and valleys of the forest floor. It rises above the peaks of the mountains and hills and reveals a splendid hue of green that will last throughout the day.

While this is a resort best known for its relaxing walk experiences through the tea plantations followed by a day spa treatment, it's some action I'm after. I've got myself a bright blue Mahindra 4x4 and set about seeing if I can tackle some of the off-road tracks in the area. Stopping only to buy some fresh jackfruit from a roadside stall I enjoy

the next few hours trundling over bridges, getting up and down some dirt tracks and stopping to watch waterfalls and enjoy the views from the Mattupetty Dam and Munnar Headworks Dam.

This is a very different part of India and I'm reminded in many ways of what it's like to live in my part of the world, Western Australia. When most people come to Australia, it's to visit the east coast, where you'll find the Great Barrier Reef and all the attractions of Sydney and Melbourne.

If you visit Western Australia you will be amazed at the opportunities for luxury travel, the opportunities for adventure and the ability to find your own place at your own pace. This is what I found in common with Kerala. India is a busy country and, in the north, is not just teeming with people but teeming with sights and sounds that are exciting and just a bit overwhelming. Kerala is different. It's an undiscovered land in a well discovered country. □

WHAT I FOUND IN COMMON WITH KERALA ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVENTURE AND THE ABILITY TO FIND YOUR OWN PLACE AT YOUR OWN PACE

