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(OFF THE BEATEN TRACK + HISTORY) x (TRAIN OR BOAT + BEACH) =

INDIA

KOCHI, BEKAL & GOA



WHY

Southwest India has the old fort town of Kochi, the most luxurious riverboats in the country, plus jungle and beach hideaways.

START

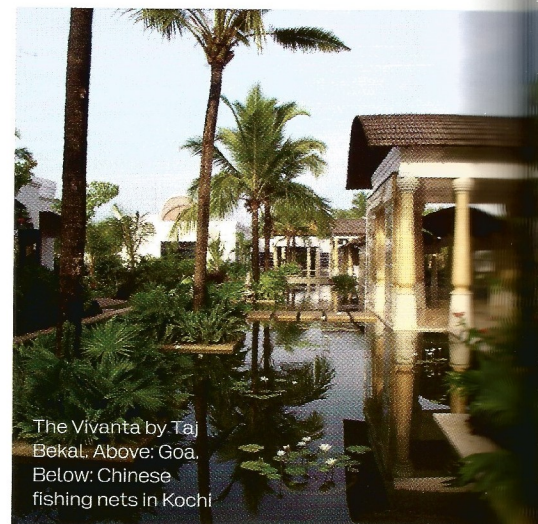
PART ONE HISTORY

Fly into Bengaluru, then on to the old trading port of Kochi on the southwest coast - the oldest European settlement in India. You can do the old town's shops, warehouses, spice auction rooms and the Paradesi Synagogue, as well as the 16th-century Mattancherry Palace, in less than a day. Be sure to walk along the waterfront as the sun rises or sets to see the famous 14th-century Chinese fishing nets - huge, cantilevered wooden structures - being lowered creakily into the water. Stay Brunton Boatyard, built in colonial style on the site of a 19th-century boatyard. Overlooking the harbour, its 22 rooms all have sea views, private terraces, four posters and antique furniture, plus there's a fabulous sea-view outdoor pool. Calvetty Road, Kochi, Kerala; 0091 484 221 5461; cghearth.com/brunton-boatyard; doubles from around £100, B&B

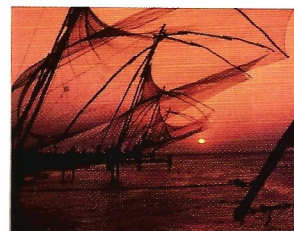
PART TWO RIVER, TRAIN AND JUNGLE

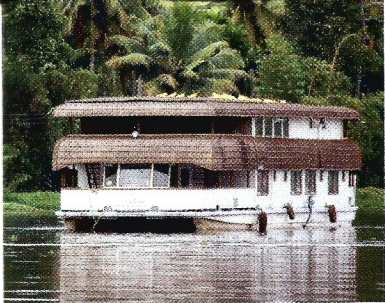
From Kochi, it's an easy 90-minute drive up to Vembanad Lake jetty to board The Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda. An elegant flatboat with just eight cabins, the MV Vrinda plies the Kerala backwaters - a series of lagoons and rivers parallel to the Arabian Sea. Cabins are cosy and large-windowed - you wake to the dull throb of engines as you chug along, with views of kids playing in the shallows, women scrubbing saris on muddy banks, and kingfishers darting about. When the waterways narrow, you clamber into a small boat to paddle the slim channels between rice paddies, and walk through steamy undergrowth to the one-armed Buddha half-statue at Karumadi. Lazier afternoons are spent lying up on deck as the world drifts past, ordering cocktails and watching the sun sinking into the silvery waters.

After three days chilling on the boat, take the train from Ernakulam (another 90-minute drive) for the near-eight-hour journey to Kanhangad. Even in

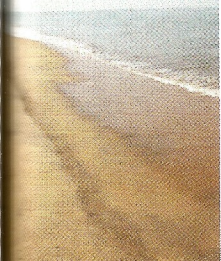


The Vivanta by Taj Bekal. Above: Goa. Below: Chinese fishing nets in Kochi





The beach near Vivanta by Taj Bekal. Above: The Oberoi MV Vrinda.



the first class, air-conditioned carriages, it's the usual wonderfully hectic, hot middle of an Indian train, with hawkers selling chai and small newspaper cornets of nuts, and the lush landscape rattling past in haze of heat and dust. On arrival, nearby Bekal has a middle-of-nowhere feel, with its old fort (the largest in Kerala) and jungle surroundings. You can fish or trek through forests and grasslands, and take a traditional boat along the backwaters from Valiyaparamba.

Stay Vivanta by Taj Bekal. This gorgeous hotel has rooms inspired by Kettuvallam houseboats, with curved, basket-like awnings and chitra pothi (palm leaf) art. Some have views of the backwaters, others look on to private courtyards with plunge pools, daybeds and outside rain showers. You can kayak through the grounds, join the free dawn yoga, try Keralan cuisine such as *sadya* (veggie dishes served on a banana leaf), detox in the Jiva Spa, or wander to the wild local beach - beautiful to look at, but a bit fierce for swimming. *The Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda, C-46/452 (II), Bristow Road, Willingdon Island, Kochi; 00800 1234 0101; oberoihotels.com; from £487 for three days, full board. Vivanta by Taj Bekal, Kappil Beach, Kasaragod, Kerala; 0091 467 661 6612; vivantabytaj.com; doubles from £87, B&B*



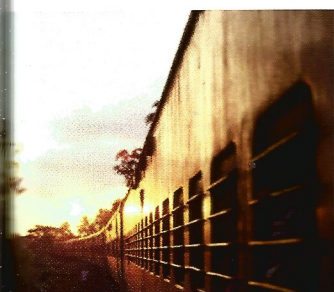
A FEW MORE DAYS...

Head up into the Western Ghats to Madikeri. The two-hour drive from Bekal rises from the balmy coconut coast high into the fresh cool air of coffee plantations and misty mountains. The new Vivanta by Taj has 63 ebony villas set on a precipitous hillside.

1st Monnangeri, Galibeedu, Coorg, Karnataka; 0091 827 266 5800; vivantabytaj.com; doubles from £127, B&B

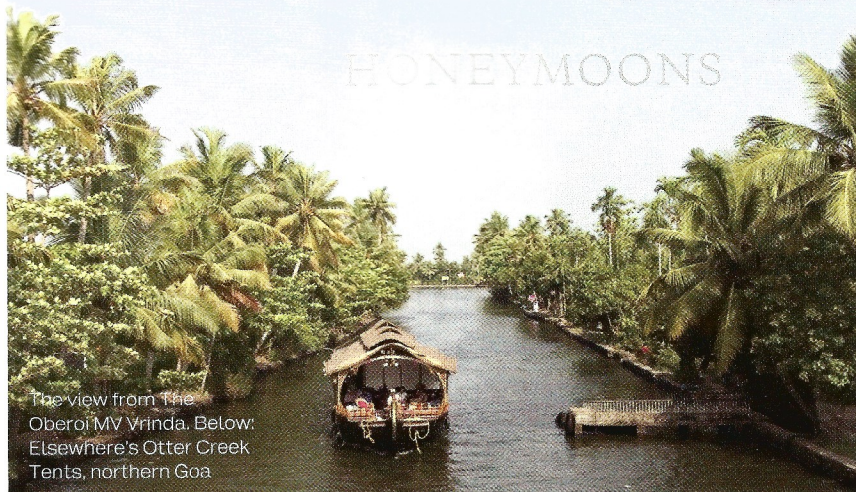


Above: The Western Ghats. Left: Take the train through the southwest state of Kerala



Words: Chris Caldicott, Frankie Mullin, Susan Ward Davies. Photography: Chris Caldicott, Getty Images. *Elsewhere: cottages are open from 1 October to the end of May; tents are open 15 October to 15 May. Minimum reservation of one week.

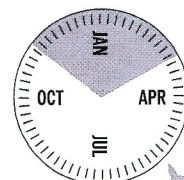
HONEYMOONS



The view from The Oberoi MV Vrinda. Below: Elsewhere's Otter Creek Tents, northern Goa

TRY

If you plan a late winter wedding, you'll honeymoon during Mahashivratri (the Great Night of Shiva) - an annual Hindu festival in February/March where devotees throng to shrines and temples to offer 108 lotus flowers and leaves of the bel tree to the god.



WHEN?

November-March

Goa is best from November to March (turtle-spotting season); and Kerala from October to February. The rest of the time it is either too rainy or too hot in both.

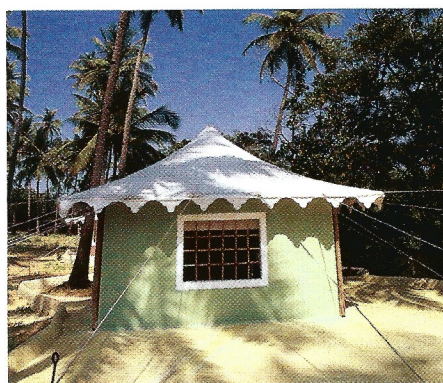
British Airways (ba.com) flies direct daily from London Heathrow to Bengaluru.

Air India (airindia.com) has flights from Mangalore (2.5 hours' drive north from Madikeri) to Goa, from around £50, one-way.

Greaves India (020 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk) can arrange any kind of India trip you fancy, with private transfers, drivers, flights and accommodation; price on application.

WIN

See page 188 for your chance to win a fabulous tailor-made Indian honeymoon. >



PART THREE THE BEACH

Goa (midway between Kerala and Mumbai, on the Arabian Sea) is famous for its markets, full-moon parties, Portuguese influence, charismatic old town and long stretches of sandy coast. The coastal road winds its way through villages, flashing glimpses of blue sea as palm trees flicker by. **Stay** In a secret location near Mandrem, on a former coconut plantation reached by a bamboo footbridge, lie three tents and four luxury cottages: Elsewhere. Each house has its own veranda from which you can gaze at the sea or stars, and interiors are simple and elegant, with antique four-poster beds. It's so private, the Brangelina clan were able to stay a week undiscovered, but staff are on hand, food can be ordered and your house will be stocked with wine, soft drinks and snacks; plus a car and driver can be arranged. *Mandrem; aseascape.com; houses, from £895 per week; tents from £185 per week, room only**