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THE ULTIMATE
CRUISE GUIDE

KERALA

TO IMMERSE YOURSELF IN SOUTH INDIA'S LAIDBACK CULTURE, TAKE THE SLOW BOAT. BY SANDY BOLER. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG

To those familiar with the gentle backwaters of Kerala, which meander out through the Malabar Coast to the Arabian Sea, where traditional rice boats ply a leisurely course, the idea of cruising along them in a luxury motor vessel might seem incongruous. But the Oberoi MV *Vrinda* allows these waterways to be explored in style, while in no way disturbing their harmony or ecology.

From our hotel in Cochin, we travelled to Vembanad Lake; this would be our regular mooring spot each night, and the place from which we would set off toward Alleppey. On that first day, we sailed for four hours, past

the tall, slender coconut palms lining the canals, children splashing in the water. We returned to Vembanad at dusk, gazing out over the water as fishermen in their tiny boats cast their gill nets to catch *karimeen*, a great delicacy in Kerala, which we would enjoy later.

Before getting ready for dinner, we set about exploring the boat. The *Vrinda* has eight deluxe cabins, each with air conditioning, a king-sized bed with wonderful pillows, a bathroom with a shower, and – the best feature – a huge, wide window at the foot of the bed, which provides a private moving-picture show of this beautiful place.

We had been promised a performance of Kathakali – a dramatic local form of dance – after dinner. As we moored at the jetty, we saw the dancers, all male, applying their elaborate make-up, transforming themselves into gods and warriors before they had even put on their costumes.

After the show, we returned to the boat for drinks in the bar, then a dinner of Keralan specialities. After many years of travelling in India, this cuisine – mostly seafood, cooked in delicate spices – remains my favourite. An excellent European menu is also available, if you prefer.



There were 10 of us in the travelling party, of all ages, and it took no time to make new friends. Over the next two days, we transferred to small rice boats to explore some of the narrower backwaters that serve as the only means of transport for the farming communities dotted along them. We visited farms and paddy fields (all below sea level), communal Tharavad houses, and the Champakulam snake-boat yard where long, ornate vessels used for racing are kept.

Among the few monuments are St Mary's Syro-Malabar Church, reputed to have been founded by St Thomas in the fifth century;

the strange half-statue of Lord Buddha in Karumadi, and the 100-year-old Hindu temple to the Mother Goddess at Nedamudi, all of which bear witness to the mixture of beliefs in these ancient and intriguing backwaters.

SAIL AWAY

Greaves Travel (+44 20 7487 9111; www.greavesindia.co.uk) offers a seven-day tour from £1,850 per person, based on two sharing, including flights, three nights at Brunton Boatyard with breakfast, three nights full-board on the *Oberoi MV Vrinda*, private sightseeing and transfers

BEST FOR TUCKING IN

VENICE TO ISTANBUL

JANE ARCHER EATS HER WAY AROUND THE WORLD

Heads it's the Polo Grill, tails Red Ginger... Picking a restaurant on Oceania Cruises's Riviera – it has six, plus a stylish dining room – is so difficult I'm flipping a coin.

The company claims to be the foodie cruise line, and happily my expectations were met. I tried them all during my 11-night voyage from Venice to Istanbul. In the Polo Grill, I had a cooked-to-order steak that melted in the mouth; in Red Ginger, spicy noodles and a delicate Thai curry; at Jacques, good, honest, rustic French dishes including Canard à l'Orange. In Toscana, I worked my way through freshly cooked bread served with a choice of 10 varieties of olive oil, four balsamic vinegars and roasted garlic bulbs, before starting on the Italian menu. The chicken breast wrapped in prosciutto was very good, although more of an American take on Tuscan cuisine – hardly surprising given the company's parentage and clientele.

Unusually for a cruise line, there is no extra charge for dining in these four speciality restaurants. You are guaranteed one meal in each, with return visits allowed, also at no charge, if there is space. For the other two venues, there is a supplement: Privée, a private dining area where meals from the Polo Grill and Toscana can be mixed and matched, charges £150 for up to 10 people, while La Reserve serves seven-course, wine-pairing dinners at about £57 or £99 a head, depending on the menu.

There is also Bon Appétit, the ship's cookery school. I learnt to make tapas, but it also has classes in everything from Norwegian to Moroccan specialities. Lessons cost about £40.

The interior of the Riviera is striking, particularly the Laliq staircase in the atrium and the exotic red-and-black decor in Red Ginger. I was in a Concierge cabin, which had a balcony and was spacious, with an attractive dark-wood finish. More opulent, however, are the three Owner's Suites. Each is as big as some apartments (more than 2,000 square feet) and has a lobby with a grand piano.

SAIL AWAY

An 11-night cruise from Venice to Istanbul costs £3,879 per person, including flights. +44 845 505 1920; www.oceaniacruises.com

