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KERALA

Parts UNKNOWN

**Edakkal
Caves**

A stunning heritage
site in Wayanad

**Cooking
Classes**

By the end, you'll be
a pro in the kitchen

Theyyam

Performances are
held across the
region all winter

*North Kerala often gets overshadowed
by its popular southern sibling. And that's
actually a blessing in disguise.*

Text and photographs by

AMIT DIXIT

☞ The Lotus
houseboat
on the
backwaters

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OULD YOU BELIEVE IT IF I TOLD YOU THERE IS A PART OF KERALA

that has it all: pristine, uncrowded beaches, looming mountains shrouded in mist, not to mention serene, unpolluted and traffic jam-free backwaters? I wouldn't have believed it either, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

For travellers, the far north of Kerala has always been a bit of an uncharted territory, although, of course, it is home to millions of people. I had been aching to visit for well over a decade but, somehow, plans kept fizzling out. Then, suddenly, it all fell into place. I flew into the brand-new Kannur airport with my friend Altaf Chapri, who runs one of the most exclusive beach resorts in this part of the country (his hospitality empire stretches, quite literally, from Kashmir to Kerala). But, before our bums hit the beach, we had a loftier rendezvous to make.

LIFE IN THE High Lane

It was a wild and dreamy drive deep into the folds of Wayanad, past coffee bushes in heady, aromatic bloom, towering teak and rubber plantations, neatly manicured tea estates, bustling, little towns—and those legendary hairpin bends...

There were culinary temptations at every turn too. I finally gave in to a sublime *mutta* (egg) curry and *parotta* combo at a clean, well-appointed teashop, which are

ubiquitous in these parts (clean ones, I mean). The tea could be politely described as 'strong'—that's how they like it here. If I'd known what sumptuous fare awaited me at our destination, I would have held out, god's-own-country promise.

The 200-acre estate where we were headed had a discreet entrance and our driver—who, in another lifetime, used to set his passengers' hearts racing on *wadi*-bashing rounds in Dubai—would have missed it, had he not been familiar with it. But we were in safe hands (down to the state government-mandated speed regulator and panic button for tourist cabs).

As we stepped out and walked in—there was a nip in the air—it felt like entering another world, a world where old-growth trees and verdure held sway. The Mangalam Carp Estate was set up in the 1800s by Colin Auley Mackenzie, a pioneer planter of the era. He was also one of the founders of the Ooty Club, and his old bungalow at the estate is the centrepiece of Pepper Trail, as this boutique hospitality venture is called. In 1932, the estate was purchased by P. Balram Kurup, a pioneer in the cultivation of rare spices and aromatic plants as well as the extraction of essential oils. The area is a major producer of eucalyptus oil to this day. Thanks to his vision, the plantation has an impressive bio-diversity of plant species.

Pepper Trail is run by his grandson, Anand Jayan, ever the attentive, genial host (seeing my dusty, travel-fatigued visage, he promptly organised an al fresco massage session for me). A tad shy, get him talking and you will find he's a mine of information on Wayanad. The package comes with a sardonic sense of humour, which makes him excellent dinner company.

Meals are multi-course affairs, and the food authentic, local fare. Pepper Trail will

remain permanently etched in my memory as the place where I discovered baby mango pickle. Over dinner, Anand opened up. All he had ever wanted to do is travel the world—he still gets away whenever he can—but life had other plans for him clearly. Pepper Trail is his labour of love and he keeps chiselling away at it, being the perfectionist he is.

Set in a clearing, the 140-year-old colonial bungalow has been restored with great care, and houses antiques, colonial furniture and family heirlooms. To the original bungalow, Anand has added a couple of tree houses. The treehouses are built high in the canopy of jackfruit trees, 40 feet above ground level, accessed by elevated walkways. The jackfruit trees grow *in* the room. When I visited, they

✦ **Wayanad is a district in the northeast of Kerala with administrative headquarters at Kalpetta. Set high on the Western Ghats, the altitude here ranges from 700 to 2,100 metres. The district was formed on 1 November, 1980 as the 12th district of Kerala by carving out areas from Kozhikode and Kannur districts. Nearly 900 sq km of the district is forest. There are three municipal towns: Kalpetta, Mananthavady and Sulthan Batherly. The district is home to many tribal communities**

were in fruit. Theoretically, you could have breakfast in bed, if ripe jackfruit were your thing. Then there is a row of plantation villas and newly minted pool villas, with temperature-controlled pools. I was installed in one of the latter. Lavish and tasteful, yet understated, it had a koi pond encircling it. The pool villas have, expectedly, seen a lot of interest from guests post-pandemic. I have to say, though, that after seeing them all, I had a hard time picking a favourite.

Next day, I woke up to birdcall. Wayanad, quite prosaically, derives its name from 'Vayal Naadu' or 'land of paddy fields'. There's something antique about the land which the name fails to capture. Humans have been in the area since at least the 10th century BCE and there's evidence of New Stone Age civilisation in the hills. Wayanad's No. 1 attraction are the Edakkal Caves—sitting on top of the Ambukuthi Hill—and we set out early to explore them, intending to beat the crowds.

Past the ticketing window, it was a steep ascent up a metal staircase. Before the staircase was built, enthusiasts just scrambled up. It's on the World Heritage waitlist, and when I entered the cool confines



↙ The heritage bungalow at Pepper Trail

↑ The Ambukuthi Hill, home to the Edakkal Caves

↓ Govindan, the master archer, takes aim



Theyyam

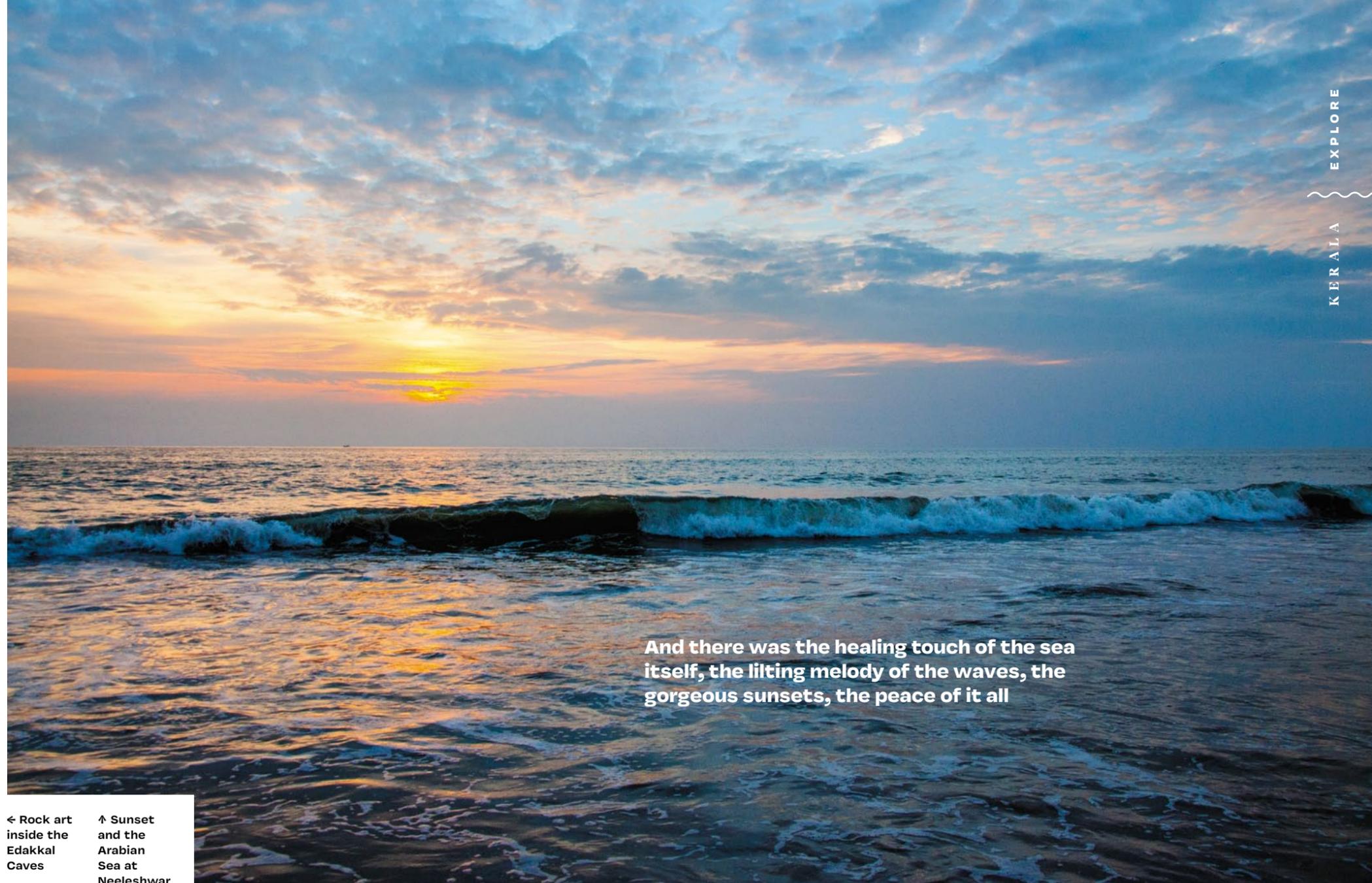
A ritual form of dance worship—featuring dramatic face painting and costumes—theyyam is popular in Kerala and Karnataka. In Kerala, it is performed in the northern districts of Kasargod, Kannur and parts of Wayanad and Kozhikode (basically, the area which used to be the Kolathunadu kingdom). If you travel to north Kerala between October and April, don't miss a performance. Over the course of the dance, the performer slowly transforms into the particular deity the theyyam is for.





← Rock art inside the Edakkal Caves

↑ Sunset and the Arabian Sea at Neeleshwar



And there was the healing touch of the sea itself, the lilting melody of the waves, the gorgeous sunsets, the peace of it all

of the main cave, I could see right away why. The walls are covered with petroglyphs (rock carvings) depicting scenes and characters from deep antiquity. Some inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi script are also present. There's a richness of detail in the art.

The ancients must have used it as protection from harsh weather and predators. It's not technically a cave, Edakkal meaning 'a stone in between'. A 30-foot-deep fissure was caused when one part of the rock split away, presumably during a geologic event. Legend, however, has it that an arrow shot by Lord Rama caused the cleft. A rock weighing several tons covers the gap, forming the roof of the shelter.

People in these parts are no strangers to fine archery, we discovered shortly. Driving to the home of one of the last traditional archers of the Kuruma community, I was expecting a lean, mean, killing machine. Govindan could not have been more different. The gentlest of souls, he enthralled us with his tales and showed off his superlative skills with bow and arrow.

Given the popularity of Edakkal—and the consequent pressure on it—local government bodies are making an effort to carve out new tourist attractions in the district, with a view to generating employment and revenue as well as distributing the visitor load more equitably.

We saw a few: the views were stunning without exception. A centre for bamboo craft turned out to be an eye-opener.

If you chose, you could have a perfectly nice holiday without ever leaving Pepper Trail (barring, of course, a quick trip to the spice shop just outside for a bit of retail therapy). I realised this when we explored the estate that afternoon. One could have walked but, after an epic lunch, the jeep was tempting. It was a wise move, I thought, as the scale of the estate dawned on me. A pavilion overlooked a small lake, ideal for a tea break. There were pre-historic dolmens. There were tea bushes as far as the eye could see. There were interesting birds. Beyond the

mountains on the horizon was Ooty.

Wayanad is one prong of a tourism triangle—more green than golden—that Altaf promotes, the others being his Neeleshwar Hermitage beach property and the luxurious Lotus houseboat. All in all, the full Kerala experience.

SONG OF THE River

We bid a reluctant farewell to Wayanad, but there was a boat we had to catch. Tourism in Kerala is synonymous with them. But when you think of a Kerala houseboat or

*kettuvallo*m, images of Lake Vembanad—that ethereal, landlocked ocean—typically spring to mind. Not enough tourists know that north Kerala has its fair share of backwaters, although short cruises for locals do ply here. Thankfully, the tourism department is trying to popularise the circuit now.

The jetty was at Payyanur, close to the legendary Payyanur Temple which, sadly, we weren't able to visit owing to Covid restrictions. At the boat we were welcomed with cold towels, temperature checks and organic cotton masks. And then we were off, sailing ever so gently on the Valiyaparamba backwaters.

Lotus is unique among Kerala houseboats

in having an upper deck, great for soaking in some vitamin D, dining under the stars and, indeed, sleeping under them. There was a chef at hand to rustle up gourmet multi-course meals. My bedroom—there are just two in all—on the lower deck came with an attached bath and a private balcony. If you want a socially-distanced holiday, there's little to beat a private houseboat. On the route were villages and a sprawling fish market to explore, but we had to exercise caution owing to the pandemic. It was good to learn that, committed as it is to sustainable tourism practices, Lotus releases no waste into the waters.

Next morning, we had breakfast on the



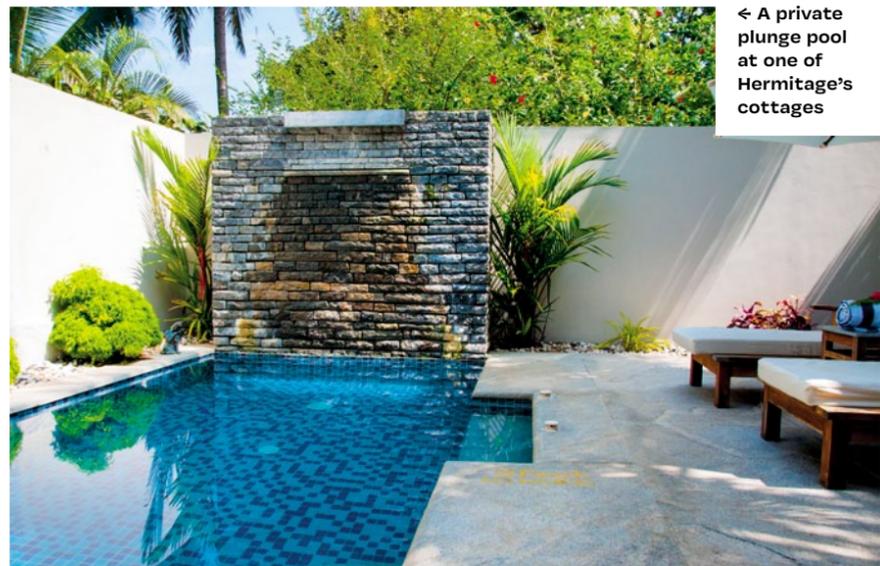
↑ A plant species that thrives in Kerala
↓ Healthy breakfast by the sea at Neeleshwar Hermitage
→ The yoga teacher at the property

deck as the sun came up in front of us, a sublime sight. We entered the Tejaswini River before disembarking near Neeleshwar. A short drive later, we were being welcomed again, now at the Hermitage.

LIFE'S A Beach

Neeleshwar Hermitage is Altaf's labour of love, and the first luxury resort in the area. In its wake, many have followed, but none has been able to match up. The resort embraces a chic, minimalist aesthetic, with local elements like thatched roofs worked in.

There are just 18 cottages, and the property has direct beach access. The



← A private plunge pool at one of Hermitage's cottages



↑ Cottage at Neeleshwar Hermitage

pricing, geared towards a foreign clientele, has ensured exclusivity. The pandemic, however, has compelled it to pivot and embrace the domestic market as well.

There are enough activities to keep the restless occupied, and a daily dispatch lists them out. These include cooking classes at which I, apparently, excelled. Altaf ate my efforts without complaint after all.

THERAPY FOR The Soul

The highlight, though, has to be the Priya Spa. Offering five spacious treatment rooms built around a courtyard, it runs under the care of Dr Suma, the in-house Ayurvedic doctor. All therapies are preceded by a complimentary consultation with her. No one has ever explained the Ayurvedic concept of *doshas* to me better than her. Apart from nudging you towards the right therapy, Dr Suma also offers lifestyle and

dietary advice. If you pay heed, the benefits of the consultation with stay with you for a long, long time.

While there are many therapies on offer—and I tried a few—what stood out for me was the unique Kalari massage. Practiced by the martial artists of Kerala, it is done by a therapist standing over you and massaging you with his feet. Yup, deep tissue in the truest sense.

Venturing forth from the property can be therapeutic too. On a village walk—respecting social-distancing norms, of course—I was glad to observe that the locals had not lost any of their traditional skills. A wizened old matron wove a palm frond in a matter of seconds and it didn't take the coconut climber any longer to fetch tender coconuts for us from atop a tree. Then we went boating in a canoe. The promise of fresh toddy did not materialise but the oversight was fixed by evening and I had the desired libation with my seafood dinner at Meenakshi, the beachside restaurant.

And there was the healing touch of the sea itself, the lilting melody of the waves, the gorgeous sunsets, the peace of it all.

The highlight of the trip was witnessing my first theyyam performance. It was also the first theyyam of the season in that temple and only a select few had been invited to attend, making it all the more special. The deity it was dedicated to was Muthappan, actually a personification of two figures: Thiruvappana or Valiya Muthappan (Vishnu) and Vellatom or Cheriya Muthappan (Shiva). If you think the Durga puja *dhaakis* know a thing or two about drums, wait till you hear the theyyam drummers at their peak. It's an absorbing experience like no other, commanding total attention. At the end of it, I felt blessed.

Indeed, the entire week—well spent immersing myself in all things Kerala—had been something of a blessing. From the healing hills to the quiet waterways, the soothing seaside and the fervour of theyyam...One couldn't ask for more. 🙏