

Domestic bliss

House-hopping in Kerala state provides a charming alternative to typical tours, as **Tim Pile** discovers in the second instalment of a two-part series on Indian homestays.

“Kerala means land of coconuts.”

My taxi driver is giving me a crash course on the tropical south Indian state he calls “God’s own country”.

“We are having world’s first elected communist government. Also, highest literacy rate in India.”

There are plenty of homestays in Fort Cochin but one name stands out. We pull up outside the Marxist-sounding Reds Residency.

I check in expecting a portrait of Lenin above my bed only to discover that “Reds” represents the initials of my hosts’ parents. The hosts, Philip and Maryann D’souza, have only been open for six months. They’re helpful, hospitable and as energetically entrepreneurial as a couple of capitalists.

Homestays offer an affordable insight into Indian culture, tradition and cuisine. Accommodation is of a high standard and often in areas of outstanding natural beauty. Unlike bigger establishments, homestay operators rely heavily on word of mouth and fear of a bad review on Tripadvisor.com.

Fort Cochin is an ideal gateway to Kerala. The enclave has a swashbuckling history and demands a day or two of even the most whirlwind sightseeing itinerary. Arab, Jewish, Portuguese, Dutch and British traders all left their mark along the Malabar Coast in search of spices such as cardamom and cloves.

Immense fortunes were made and countless lives lost. Plain old pepper, once the world’s most sought after spice, was known as “black gold” long before nations waged wars over oil.

The atmospheric town draws on its illustrious heritage. Restored mansions and colonial British bungalows serve as boutique hotels; boys play cricket on former military-parade grounds and curious tourists outnumber the faithful at St Francis Church, one of India’s oldest.

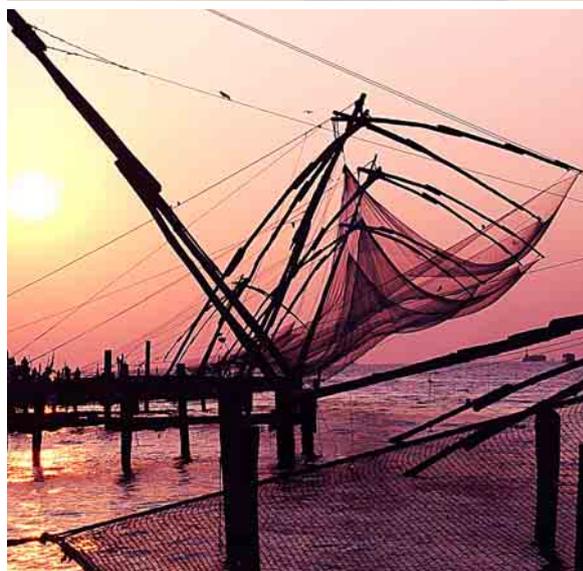
Crowds gather for sunset near giant cantilevered fishing nets, which were introduced by Chinese merchants in the 14th century. Tidal patterns (and tourist rupees) dictate when the sinewy fishermen lower the colossal contraptions into the sea.

Back at Reds Residency, Philip is busy welcoming new arrivals with his well-polished “things to do and see in Cochin” speech. He helps one guest find a barber, arranges bicycle hire for a French couple, then makes a fresh pot of tea for a homesick Englishman.

Three hours south of Cochin lies a bewitching network of rivers, lakes and canals known as the backwaters. Renting a houseboat to explore the region is almost compulsory. Almost. I’m sticking to my homestay habit and have booked a room at Green Palm Homes.

Situated on an island in the verdant village of Chennamkary, my accommodation is only accessible by public ferry – or dugout canoe. The house is a modern, comfortable base for discovering a way of life that has changed little over the centuries.

Pictures: Tim Pile



result, Thomas now works with eight local families who let out rooms under the Green Palm umbrella.

Far from grabbing the chance to move the business upmarket, Thomas is building a new house in which foreign students will be able to stay for free in exchange for their labour.

“Our younger generation no longer want to do manual work,” he laments. “If they see Westerners getting their hands dirty, perhaps they’ll think twice about leaving for the big cities.”

Backwater facts come thick and fast on a Green Palm morning walk. Need to know what a toddy tapper does? Thomas beckons a passer-by, introduces him and explains how he climbs palm trees to extract the sugary sap, or toddy. He takes us to the blacksmith’s house and describes the average day (and salary) of a mud digger, pausing briefly to watch a kingfisher swoop on its prey.

We learn that the reclaimed island we’re staying on is slowly sinking and that the biggest, fanciest properties are owned by villagers who have worked in the Gulf.

Time slows to a standstill in the backwaters and the hardest part of a Green Palm visit is summoning the energy to leave.

The coastal town of Varkala is an easy place to like. Hotels, restaurants and internet cafes line a crowded cliff top overlooking the glistening Arabian Sea. Below, fishermen chant as they haul in their nets in a giant game of tug of war.

At sunset, there are more cameras than cocktails as the last traces of scarlet drain from the sky. Hungry travellers tuck into snapper, slow-baked in tandoor ovens as lights from fishing vessels flicker on the horizon.

Viswanathan is a retired air-force engineer and my host at the charming La Exotica Homestay. He wants to discuss high literacy rates in Kerala but I steer him on to the subject of Tripadvisor.com. Does he worry much about bad reviews?

“Couldn’t care less,” he says, jaw jutting out. Then he looks sheepish and grins. “But make sure you write something nice about us please.”

Clockwise from right: the backwaters of Kerala; fishing nets in the coastal town of Varkala; the Reds Residency, in Fort Cochin.

Green Palm Homes is run by Thomas, whose family first offered floor space to a double-booked Swedish tour group in 1989. The generous tip they received encouraged the cash-strapped rice farmers to upgrade their home in a bid to draw more visitors seeking an authentic backwater experience.

The homestay made it into the *Lonely Planet India* in 2006, which led to an increasing flow of guests. As a

Getting there: Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) flies from Hong Kong to Mumbai and continues on to Cochin. Visit redsresidency.in, greenpalmhomes.com and laexotica.in for details. You can also post an inquiry on the India Mike travel site (IndiaMike.com).