

2014 NEWCOMERS' GUIDE

WITH INSIDER TIPS FROM IN-THE-KNOW LOCALS

221 FACTS, FESTIVALS, PARKS, PEOPLE, LANDMARKS AND MORE

AUSTIN

MONTHLY | JUNE 2014



HIGH AND DRY
 110 people move here every day. Is there enough water for everyone?

TO THE EXTREME
 An all-access pass to Austin's first X Games

*****C9999 #DRC
 #AMM1/003807/4060#C9999 #DRC
 P20 P-18
 #BXBDYMY *****CAR-RT LOT**C007

Travel

AMAZING PLACES TO GO, NEAR AND FAR JUNE 2014

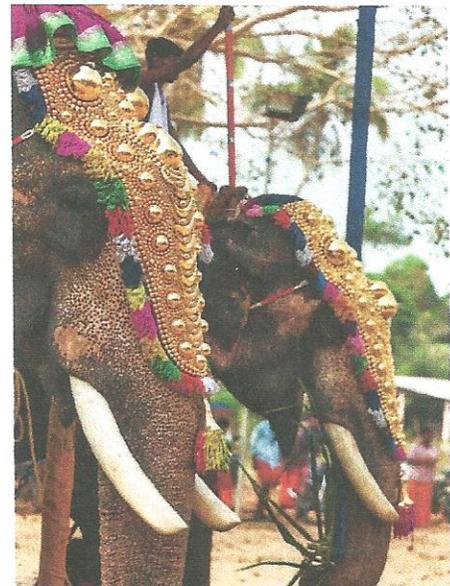
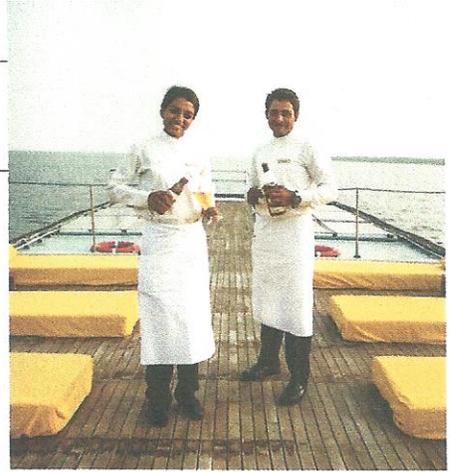
INDIAN SUMMER

Feast your eyes on the colorful
landscape, wildlife and
architecture of Kerala, India.

PAGE 154



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
The scenic Backwater Region;
cheerful staff aboard the
Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda; a
decorated elephant



SENSORY OVERLOAD

Experience the sights, sounds and scents of the Malabar Coast

BY BECCA HENSLEY

On the **Malabar Coast**, I expect the air to be a sachet of ginger, cinnamon, pepper and cardamom. I've heard that sailors once forwent the stars, navigating instead by sense of smell to the spice-rich shores that line **Kerala in Southwestern India**. King Solomon once traded here, and everyone from the Phoenicians to the Chinese to the Portuguese after him. So I expect the wind to waft something that smacks of masala tea.

My driver has odorized his car with an artificial scent meant to please, but it doesn't. So, about halfway to our destination on **Lake Vembanad**, the heart of a labyrinthine land-

scape of rivers and waterways that pierce this muggy, verdant jungle landscape, I beg him to roll down the window so I can inhale the outdoors. A balmy brine blows in. It's not pungent pepper—a commodity once as pricy as gold—that scents the outdoors. Rather, Kerala's modern perfume evokes frothy waves, street-made coffee and coconuts. That's all right by me, especially when coupled with the sights of palm trees, villages with pink, turquoise and yellow buildings, temples with rooftops as elaborate as London wedding hats and throngs of men wearing

lungis, or practical skirts of various lengths that knot stylishly at the waist.

This sun-dappled, emerald-green section of India couldn't be more different than urbane Delhi. Even while clambering along the bumpy road, I recognize a more laid-back demeanor among the denizens. As in all beach regions, things seem more relaxed, earthy and friendly, as if the mist born from the confluence of the **Indian Ocean** and **Arabian Sea** spouts a fog that carries a pacifying fairy dust. Perhaps that's what slows everybody down to a life-affirming pace, deeply rooted in fertile ground. No wonder the area is well known for yoga ashrams and the healing, ancient art of Ayurveda, a science of well-being and longevity that dates back 10,000 years. Visitors here can partake in both at specially certified clinics, spas and hotels bearing the green leaf emblem. But just perusing the rice paddies, plantation-studded hills and deeply ingrained Hindu culture is reason to plan a trip here.

I've come to Kerala to board the **Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda**, an eight-guest-

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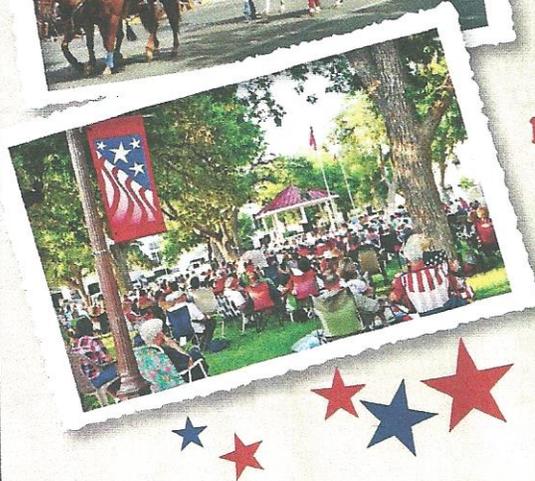
Insider Tips

▼
In Kerala, order a sadya, a ceremonial meal served on a banana leaf, composed of dozens of tiny dishes served at once. Eat like a local and use only your fingers.

▼
In Cochin, walk the waterfront to observe the colossal cantilevered fishing nets, brought to the region by traders from the court of Kublai Khan.

▼
Don't miss a Kathakali dance, where dancers decked out in exaggerated costumes and makeup tell stories from Hindu epics like the Ramayana.

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JULY 3
6PM - FREEDOM FIESTA!
STREET DANCE - DOWNTOWN

JULY 4
10AM - BIGGEST SMALL-TOWN
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TRAVEL
FAR

Continued from page 154

room, yacht-style houseboat, which docks at night on a village-encircled jetty on Lake Vembanad. During the day, it glides across the glassy body of water before navigating picturesque, rural canals and waterways. Called the **Backwater Region**, this patchwork of lagoons and channels once transported rice and spices from inland farms. Still used today by locals and fishermen, the watercourses intersect communities awash in centuries-old rural traditions. Slowly cruising each day, we see brightly attired women washing laundry in the water, sloping, thatch-roofed huts, swimmers gathering mussels in copper pots and children in pristine uniforms headed to school in dugout canoes. Churches, temples and men-only toddy shops (rough-hewn moonshine taverns) line the banks. At times, we disembark, then board tiny rice boats to drift to less-navigable sections of Kerala.

Part of the luxury Oberoi brand, the Motor Vessel Vrinda mimics the traditional Kerala kettuvallam, a traditional hand-carved cargo boat made without nails and joined by reams of coconut bark-made rope. With king-bed guest rooms, five-star service, superior local food and decks aplenty, the all-inclusive floating hotel is meant to feel as tranquil as the lake. Adrift, it moves at a slow pace that illuminates and frames every sight, putting passengers mid-action as men donning wide-brimmed hats stab the lake bottom for fish, seated women weave straw into brooms and musicians practice their drums, as if serenading our passage. Nightly entertainment brings local dancers, crooning quartets and storytellers aboard.

A highlight for my trip happens on the shore's road when my Micato Safaris guide Puneet Dan spots a flamboyant temple procession. "Stop," he orders the driver. He looks at me and says, "Bring your camera." We leap out of the car to join a temple's annual parade. Drummers, fire-bearers, decorated elephants, chanting devotees with painted faces and mystical priests holding a Shiva statue aloft invite us to march in their procession. We do, and just like that, Kerala conquers my heart. ■