

A HONEYMOON IN 'GOD'S OWN COUNTRY'

Travel Journalist **Deborah Ratcliffe** visited India recently and came back with this special report for **I DO**

A honeymoon is something very special. It's a once in a lifetime experience offering the bride and groom a chance to plan something unique to remember for the rest of their lives.

Many honeymoon tours offer unforgettable moments. One such is the 'Coconut Holiday' to Kerala in India - called 'God's own Country' by locals, who are predominantly Christian. The hotels used are quite unique - set in stunning locations with en suite 'outdoor bathrooms' and, for pure indulgence, intimate private swimming pools. It offers honeymooners a chance to unwind after the rigours and stress of the actual wedding.

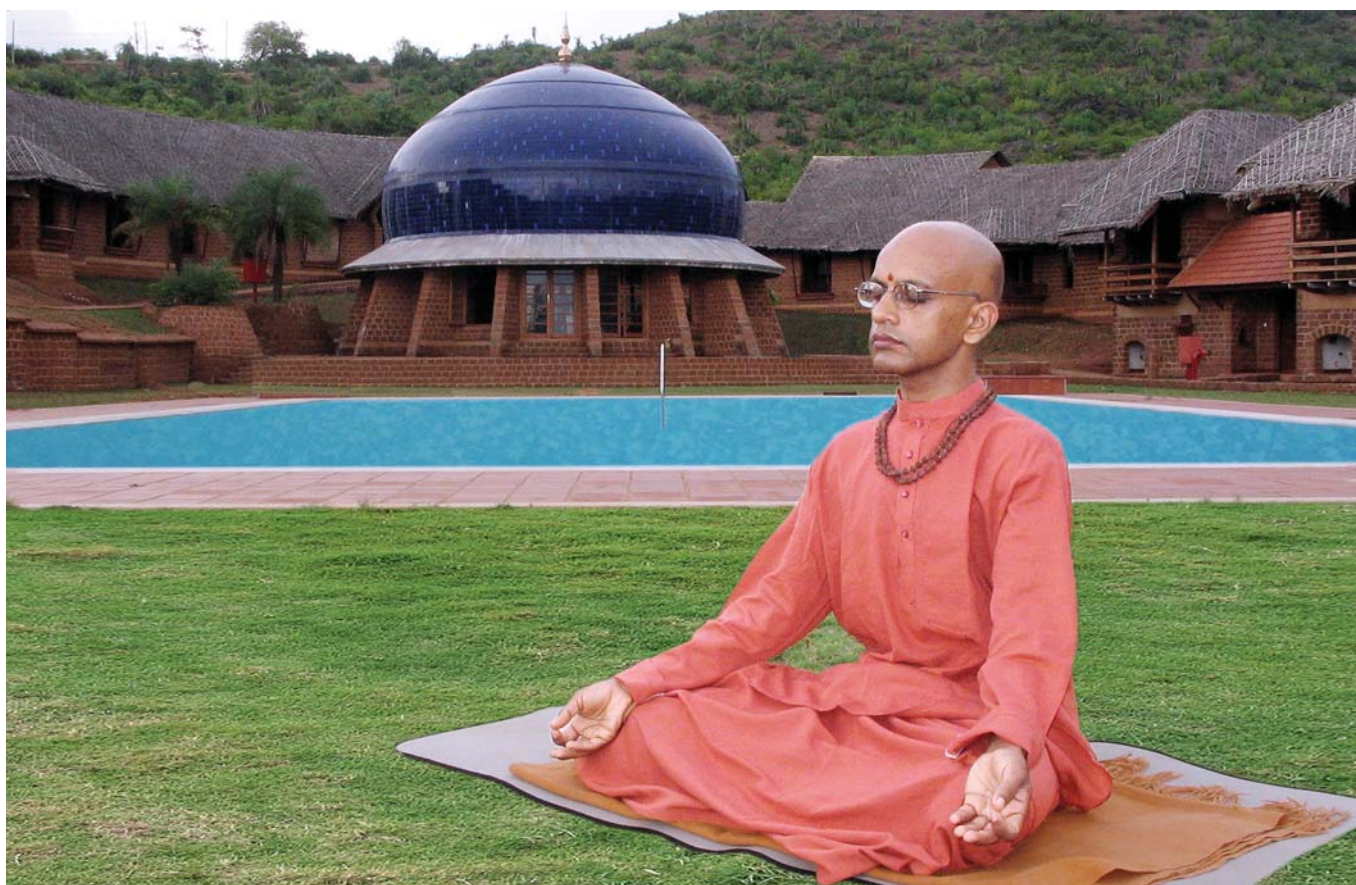
I have often visited the area and am constantly mesmerised by the overpowering lush vegetation with rolling hills painted, like an artist's palette, with every hue of green. Wherever you look there is colour: Orchids, bougainvillea and

lotus flowers create a feast for the eye. Butterflies, kingfishers and parakeets vie with each other with their astonishing coats of many colours; while the coastline brings no respite with its blinding white sand and stunning azure sea.

The 'Coconut Holiday' starts off in Kochi (Cochin), a bustling fishing port where guests stay at the Brunton Boatyard, a charismatic converted colonial building, now a chic, intimate hotel with fabulous views of the port and sea. Bedrooms are romantically furnished with quaint four-poster beds and views from the bathtub of passing ships. While there you are taken on a sightseeing tour of the highlights of the city including the distinctive cantilevered Chinese fishing nets, the Catholic St. Francis Church, the Mattancherry Palace and you even have time to start buying souvenirs. There is an optional evening visit to see the famed Kathakali dancers and watch them apply their intricate makeup.

The journey then takes you up to the cooler climes of the Hill Country to stay in Periyar at the Spice Village hotel. Here, enjoy a soothing Indian Ayurvedic treatment - try a head massage or go for the full body treatment - it's just wonderful. Then take a boat safari to see the wildlife of the Periyar Lake and later, before dinner, watch the chef demonstrate local dishes.

Next you drive back down to the shores of Vembanad Lake to stay at the Coconut Lagoon - rated by Conde Nast Traveller magazine as one of the top 25 best 'getaways'. It's frequented by the rich and famous - rumour has it that Richard Gere and Paul McCartney have stayed here. It's a place to totally chill out and take it easy: - to idle away the hours gently swinging in a hammock or take a cruise on the Lake to see the gentle pace of village life of the Kerala 'Backwaters'.





FACT BOX

Best times of the year
 Jan - Mar: cool, dry
 April - May: Summer - hot
 June - August: Monsoon - humid and hot
 Sept - Dec: pleasant, dry

Contact details
 Coconut Holiday - book direct to
 cghearth hotels, Kerala:
 contact@cghearth.com
 http://www.cghearth.com/
 Emirates: Sales office: 25577255

Clothes
 Loose cotton or linens



Even getting there is romantic - a small motor boat chugs slowly down the waterways of the 'Backwaters' - the only means of accessibility. Immediately you begin to feel something wonderful awaits you - and, indeed, as the boat gently glides to the landing stage, you see the magnificent Kerala buildings - your home for the holiday. They are all reconstructed from original local houses, renovated and restored to create a unique ambience. 'Heritage' bungalows or 'mansions' dot the grounds surrounded by the gentle waters of Vembanad Lake, while for something truly special guests can relax in villas with their own exclusive pool for total seclusion. A delightful feature of the hotel are the open air bathrooms -totally private but totally al fresco.

Here the key word is relaxation - if gently swinging in your hammock becomes tedious try some yoga, go for a walk with the hotel's naturalist or take an evening cruise on the Vembanad Lake to watch the sunset serenaded by the evocative tones of a flute. It has to be one of the most romantic moments ever. As you watch the sun set the lake literally turns to shimmering mercury, as the dying embers of the day fade softly away. The hotel is a favourite haunt for Indian couples who are wooed by the serenity of the lake.

Finally, spend some time by the sea at the Marari Beach hotel, built in the style of a traditional fisherman village, with thatched roofs, raised verandahs and, with a tap by the entrance, to wash your feet before entering your 'bungalow'. Wander through the surrounding palm groves before meandering along the white gold beach searching for shells. Relax in the cool waters of the swimming pool, or, if staying in a villa enjoy the tranquillity of your own private pool. Then, honeymoon over, return to Kochi and fly home laden with unforgettable memories.

Throughout the holiday small surprises will await you; your bed will be garlanded with flowers, their heady scent lingering on into the night. Romantic candlelit dinners will be arranged upon request as will a magnificent Kerala wedding re-enactment for stunning pictures and magical memories.

Flights are available from Malta on Emirates to Kochi via Dubai, and overnight stops can be arranged to spend time exploring this pulsating city.