

SOUL FOOD

Food is so much more than just a belly-filler in Kerala. In this sultry strip of southern India, it has religious, cultural, even medicinal powers. **Alicia Miller** gets a taste for it

Photography: **Cedric Arnold**



Shine a light: boating through the backwaters. Opposite, appam with vegetable stew — a typical breakfast in Kerala



In a swirl: clockwise from top left, interior of Malabar House hotel in Fort Kochi; prawn stir-fry with coconut chips and Kallappambread; fresh pearl-spot fish; taking a walk through the Coconut Lagoon resort; Kerala-style thali; houseboats in the

backwaters; Kerala has dozens of different varieties of bananas for sale in its markets; spice box; strolling on Marari Beach; cycling through Kochi; the impressive Catholic church in Kochi; a fisherman with his Chinese fishing nets



lick-clackety-click. The pots are bubbling gently, milky froth dislodging their domed silver lids. Balanced above the dusty road on makeshift brick hearths, they are like tin soldiers in a line – one of a thousand gleaming rows, a mere clutch in a collection of more than three million pots. Each burnished sphere looks identical to the next, but no two are alike: for in every bursting belly are the prayers of the woman who brought it, the one who stands guarding it now. The sun is streaming down in unyielding ribbons; the air is thick with city heat – and soft click-clackety-clicks.

It's a lot of fuss for rice pudding. And that's what it is – kilos of rice, stewed until gloopy, with lashings of coconut milk and jaggery, the caramel-toned local sugar that's traded by the conical half-kilo block. Three million wives, mothers and daughters, most clad in crisp white saris, have come to cook it right here, in the Kerala capital of Trivandrum, in what is the single largest gathering of women anywhere on the planet. From all over the state and further afield they have come – by foot and car, train and cart – to gather for the annual Pongala festival in a dozen-kilometre-thick orbit around the technicolour Attukal temple. Their recipes may vary, but it's not the taste that matters. It's the coveted blessing of the Hindu goddess Attukal Bhagavathy, whose army of priests will emerge this afternoon to say prayers in her name. Only then will each woman make the slow journey home – to Kochi or Kolkata or wherever it may be – and scoop out sticky spoonfuls of blessed pudding to her family, so they will be blessed too. It's just 10am now, and the ceremony won't reach them for hours. But unhurried and uncomplaining, the ladies wait, sweating in the heat, swatting away flies and catching up with old friends. They grit their teeth, but until it is blessed not a grain will pass their lips.

FESTIVAL FEVER
The Attukal Pongala takes place every February – in 2016 it's on the 23rd of the month. Can't visit then? There are literally hundreds of local festivals from January to March. Ask your hotel or driver to find one near you

In Kerala, you really are what you eat – which makes it one of the planet's most fascinating destinations for those who like to eat their way under the skin of a place. Food isn't only something for bellies, but hearts, minds and souls, too. Perhaps it's the landscape, invariably edible: speeding along the roads from Kochi to Trivandrum, you need only reach an arm out the car window to grab lunch. In just a week snaking south towards the capital, I collected bulbous brown tamarind pods, fallen among vaulting raintrees; broke tiny crescent figures off giant red cashew fruit; saw luminous green mangoes fattening on their branches; plucked the fragrant leaves from allspice bushes to rub between my palms. The streets of Colonial Thekkady, in the hills, where more spices grow than anywhere else, are fragrant by pepper and cardamom, the lowland's golden beaches perfumed with coconut. And the colours, everywhere, are the bulging tones of a tropical fruit bowl: purple



I WATCH AS A NEAR-NAKED MAN SCRAMBLES UP A PALM LIKE IT'S THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD. HIS LOIN CLOTH BILLOWS IN THE BREEZE AS HE WORKS

Head for heights: a morning toddy-tapper scrambles up coconut trees in Kerala's backwaters



KERALANS SAY THEY'RE PROUD TO WELCOME ALL PEOPLE — THEY FEEL TOO LUCKY NOT TO. THE ONLY DISAGREEMENTS ARE THE FRIENDLY KIND — ABOUT WHAT'S ON THE TABLE

saris, swishing behind girls dashing to the bus stop; sun-bleached pink and red signs selling tyres or toothpaste; children skipping in crisp blue uniforms; leather-skinned old men, cycling on bikes as yellow as sunshine; and all around them green, green, green.

While in some parts of India the colours scream and shout and clash, in Kerala they are more like a harmonious rainbow. In this long, slim length of beach-speckled coast, you'll find Muslims, Hindus and the country's largest community of Christians — mixing freely in a way they don't in other parts of the country. At Fort Kochi, the atmospheric old port where I start my trip one week before the Pongala, tourists gather by the famous Chinese fishing nets, watching them sail up and down theatrically as fishermen haul in handfuls of sardines and crabs. But look beyond, and in a Portuguese church the colour of butter, Vasco da Gama's grave rests next to an English lawn once host to Raj parades; the cluttered shops of Jew Town — still home to seven Jews and an 18th-century synagogue — fringe a Dutch palace. The palace's interior? It's frescoed with vivid murals of the Hindu god Krishna. Keralans say they are proud to welcome all people — they feel too lucky not to. The only real disagreements are the friendly kind — about what's on the table.

'You simply cannot make Syrian-Christian food without coconuts,' says Mrs Philipkutty a couple of days later, as I watch a near-naked man scramble up a palm tree like it's the easiest thing in the world. His loincloth billowing in the breeze, he begins flicking weighty orbs down for others below to collect. In a neighbouring palm, another man ascends — his job, to 'tap' the sap and eke out frothy toddy, which will ferment to become the local answer to Johnnie Walker. In every direction, the coconut plantation stretches, hemmed in only by the house and its adjoining six villas. And the pin-straight canal that lies beyond them. To get from Kochi to here, a homestay in the lush backwaters of Kumarakom, I had settled into the back of my hired driver's van for three hours of winding roads. When the dusty arteries got narrower and narrower, and finally petered out at the water's edge, I clambered into a tiny longboat — over packed luggage and all — to be punted across this silvery channel. These backwaters are one of Kerala's unique wonders: mile upon mile of emerald land marbled with endless veins

of canals, it's India's own Venice. Fishing nets nod to us in the distance; thatched houseboats slink by on the horizon. Once the crossing is made, there's deliciously little to do: leaf through a book on the hammock under the trees, or take a sunset boat ride with a local fisherman. And eat: Mrs Philipkutty is a famously good cook.

In her cosy kitchen, flush with the nutty scent of warming coconut oil, I get a run-down on the Syrian-Christian variant of Keralan cuisine. The Hindus eat vegetables — sometimes plated up *tapas*-style on smooth banana leaves. The Muslims prefer their rich mutton or beef stews, biryanis, and plenty of spice. But the Syrian-Christians, they cook with fish, chicken — and a lot of coconut. Tonight, for the homestead dinner — it's just me and five other guests — there will be bitter gourd fried in delicate slivers; earthy beetroot lifted with a sprinkle of fennel; green beans with grated coconut and cumin; curry-leaf and ginger-scented prawns. To ease it all down, heaped bowlfuls of fluffy Keralan rice — short, fat and flecked with red — and lacy *appam*, coconut pancakes. But the star is fish *molee*, a creamy coconut curry staple of Christian cuisine — and I'm to help make it. Mrs Philipkutty issues measured, soft instructions, taking me through slowly, step by step. The air is thick with sizzling onions, ginger, garlic and chilli. Mustard seeds crackle and pop; curry leaves curl and crispen. Coconut milk, coconut vinegar and pearl-spot fish stand at the ready for the appointed moment. But first, she scoops up the turmeric, and spoons it in generously. 'A little extra today, I think,' she murmurs. 'I have a headache.'

While Keralans might not agree on the same god or the same meal, they do agree on the power of turmeric. Here this yolky-hued powder isn't used for flavour or for its unmistakable colour — it's because it's considered the most potent health-booster around. Next day, after a few hours kicking my heels in the creamy whites of Marari Beach, a pinstraight stretch of sand an hour's drive and a world away from lush Kumarakom, my driver and I stop at a brimming market. The spice stall is like a trip to the chemist. A dozen or more neat jars are lined up before me. Got a cold? Turmeric, of course — it's an antiseptic. Toothache? That will call for cloves — the oils numb the pain. Use boiled vanilla and >

SPICE STOCKUP ▶
If you want to buy spices, skip the touristy shops and ask your driver to take you to a locals' stall and have him translate for you. Black pepper is the must-buy crop, but Kerala also produces fine cardamom, nutmeg and cinnamon

What a carry-on: opposite, curry leaves are a staple of Keralan cuisine



Sea-worthy: clockwise from right, fisherman with his boat on Marari Beach; freshly harvested coconuts; a villa at Coconut Lagoon resort; street adverts are as colourful as the locals; adding onions, chilli and ginger to spice-infused coconut oil; the Chinese fishing nets of Fort Kochi at dusk; a priest at a Hindu temple close to Marari Beach; grilled tuna — as served at Malabar House



pepper to detox the kidneys; narunandi herb-laced lemonade to sort out your digestion. Even when I move onto the fruit stall, a seller suggests a special banana to make my boyfriend especially virile. Who needs aspirin? Food is medicine — as well as a blessing — whatever your ill.

Even the very finest doctors in the state agree: two days later, in the womb-like environs of the Ayurvedic doctor's office in the outskirts of Trivandrum, the doctor blinks at me through his spectacles. I shift in my seat. My driver has whisked me four hours south of the backwaters and beaches to be in the capital for the Pongala, and now I need to unwind. The ancient practice of Ayurveda — which believes in balancing the body naturally to eliminate ailments — is so deeply enshrined in the Kerala psyche that here its doctors wield the same clout as hospital surgeons. After examining my hands, my pulse, it's decided that something concerning my mind is 'off'. I shrug — I suppose I've had a bit of trouble sleeping lately. He leans back in his chair, satisfied to have pinpointed it. If I was here for longer — three weeks, minimum — he would put me on a corrective diet. Perhaps something with a little more spice, a little less sugar — definitely no dairy, but plenty of herbal teas. But time-poor as I am, instead I'm signed up for a taster *shirodhara* treatment: a massage, followed by a slow pouring of warm garden-herb-infused sesame oil across my brow, which is meant to stimulate my third eye (or, my pineal gland, which regulates sleep). I strip down and don a paper nappy, and a duo of masseurs begin to marinate me like I'm the main course at Sunday lunch. As birds squawk empathetically outside the darkened room, the fragrant oil flows gently, persistently against my browline. I slip into a deep sleep.

Four hours later, I am still smelling barbecue-ready, but I'm starting to like it. I smell like Kerala. Trundling down steps to Kovalam Beach, I see how the sun reflects across the waves like glass. The sunsets in Kerala are otherworldly — a perfect circle of red, unburdened and unembellished by cloud, simply dips below distant haze and the Arabian Sea. Padding across the golden grains, I relish the thought of my beach days to come — three of them, starting from this moment. But tanning can wait; I settle into a seaside restaurant, where I can all but wiggle my toes in the sand. I place my order — lobster (the Kovalam speciality), dressed in ginger and curry leaves — and watch the scene unfold. Kids, drenched by the surf, excitedly kick a football; young couples spell out their initials in the gold; men hawk old-fashioned seaside trinkets. Beyond them, a few women in white saris tread the beach. It was only this morning that I was among them and millions of others, and their millions of rice puddings — and only eight days since I arrived in Kerala. Now, in the dusk, the prayers are long done. These women, whether Christian or Hindu or just plain Kerala, walk proudly with their pots, dishing out spoonfuls of rice to strangers on the beach so they will be blessed, too. They're still a way from me yet — will the contents of the pot last? But as I see my server approaching, I decide not to worry. After all, I've learned that in Kerala blessings take many different forms. And I'm sure of one thing when my big fat lobster is placed down in front of me — nothing's holier than dinner. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

Emirates (emirates.com) flies from Heathrow to Kochi or Trivandrum, via Dubai, from £380 return. **Air India** (airindia.com) flies from Heathrow to Kochi from £450, via Mumbai.

Where to stay

Relais & Châteaux's Malabar House (00 91484 2216666, malabarhouse.com), in Fort Kochi, has doubles from £96, B&B. In the backwaters, try **Coconut Lagoon** (00 91484 301 1711, cghearth.com; doubles from £105, full board). For a homestay with great food, book **Philipkutty's Farm** (00 91 482927 5130, philipkuttysfarm.com; villas from £132, full board). Near the backwaters, try **Marari Beach Resort** (00 91478 286 3801, cghearth.com; doubles from £217, full board). In Kovalam, the **Leela** (00 91471 305 1234, theleela.com) has doubles from £110, room only.

Where to eat

All the hotels featured come with excellent dining options. However,

in Kochi, also hit the **Brunton Boatyard** for top-notch seafood (00 91282 301 1711, cghearth.com) and the cool **Kashi gallery-cum-cafe** (00 91484 2215769, kashiartgallery.com). Sign up for a cookery class at the home of **Nimmy Paul**, Kerala's answer to Delia — you get a killer lunch (nimmypaul.com; £25pp).

Get around

You will need a driver. A tour operator will include this; if travelling independently, ask your hotel to recommend someone. Expect to pay around £30-£50 per day, plus tip.

Go packaged

Audley (01993 838330, audleytravel.com) has an 11-day 'Classic Kerala' trip including Kochi, the backwaters, and Marari Beach from £1,495pp, with flights and driver. Or try **Thomas Cook** (01733 224808, thomascok.com).

Further information

A visa is required by British citizens. Most can apply for an eTV visa (about £38) online at indianvisaonline.gov.in.

