

NEW LAUNCH KERALA



# Cool Waters

Summer? Why worry? Turn up the air-conditioning and Kerala is still God's Own Country. **Hari Menon** sample's the state's newest luxe experience

**T**his time of the year, a Kerala backwater can be something of a steamy affair. When it isn't raining, it's humid enough that an indulgent indolence seems more like a survival technique than anything vaguely sinful. Happily, there are good folks about who will help you navigate any such hedonistic desires in more than a little bliss. Such as having the stress kneaded out of your back on the aft deck of a luxury cruiser. Meanwhile your thoughts turn in idle fashion to the magic chef Simu



Apsara and The Park  
on Vembanad Lake

will work with the fish that will become lunch once you've showered in your cabin, one that's named after a celestial maiden and certainly looks good enough to host one, should that particular eventuality come into improbable being.

Invocations of imaginary creatures aside, everything else I'm experiencing is real. This isn't really the traditional season to visit Kerala and cruise its backwaters, but it certainly shows that climate is no obstacle to having a lovely holiday—aided, it must be said, by air-conditioning wherever it is possible. That's set to beer-chilling levels, fortunately, as I'm

**The AC is set to beer-chilling levels, fortunately, as I'm wafted past the sultry shore in the cruiser Apsara, a featured attraction at the Park on Vembanad Lake**

wafted past the sultry shore in the *Apsara*, a cruiser that's a featured attraction at the chic new addition to Kerala's luxury leisure market, The Park on Vembanad Lake.

The Park's style actually points out one possible solution to where the high end of the leisure market in the state will head. Luxury travel in Kerala has become much of a muchness. That's perhaps unavoidable, since the hoteliering principles involved usually centre on a few standard motifs. The food is always a delicious but vaguely deracinated Kerala cuisine; read nouvelle presentation, an

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easy hand on the spice and the trick that all the best Kerala chefs have perfected—that of using traditional local ingredients and combinations (prawn and mango, say), while at the same time avoiding the one thing that ruins Kerala food for several outsiders and fraudulent Malayalis like me. It is more or less a given that the more upmarket a Kerala hotel is, the less anything will reek of coconut oil.

The accommodation is always luxurious; the rooms will be tastefully appointed with the sort of eye that lines the best drawing rooms in upper-class India with controversy-free conversation pieces,

while the bathrooms will look wonderful and will have at least one mystifying or frustrating fitting, in the time-honoured manner of good hotels everywhere.

The experience will always involve much pampered lazing, as you totter in a pleasurable daze from the spa to the pool and back again. Kerala is touted as an idyllic getaway, and the best luxury resorts all manage to make you feel as if you have this wonderful waterway-lined tropical garden more or less to yourself. Considering that the Alappuzha backwaters, around which much of Kerala's tourism centres, are among the most



**Everything, from the neat uncluttered entrance through the pathway that leads to your room, past the restaurants and the pool, to the rooms themselves, speaks the language of simple, clean lines**

densely populated places on earth (1,250 people per square kilometre—50 times the global average—comfortably puts it in the world's top 10), this actually has to rate as one of Indian hoteliering's truly remarkable achievements.

In fact, the musicians and dancers at the de rigueur cultural show (which is typically a half-hour excerpt from a performance that can go on all night) may be the only locals you will ever meet, apart from the driver who ferries you from the airport.

**T**his is all quite wonderful to do, but it's easy to see how, from a regular traveller's point of view, one Kerala experience can rather seamlessly swim into another. This is actually rather nice if you like holidaying in Kerala, but terrible from the point of view of the hotelier, because you're immediately reducing a luxury package to the level of an undifferentiated commodity—not a good idea at all when you're charging prices that definitely qualify as premium for this part of the world.

Several fail on this count, but the best places respond, with at least some degree of credibility, with features like location, heritage buildings, art collections, gourmet cooking classes and the like.

Clockwise from left: the backwaters near the hotel; the pool; the poolside





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Habituals of the Park chain will recognise that there are many quite lovely things about the group that tend to be under-represented in the hype over larger Indian hotel chains.

For instance Mist, at The Park, New Delhi, offers what has to be close to the best pizza you can get in India, and likewise, Somewhere Else at The Park, Kolkata, is just one of the nicest bars in India, to mention just two. But above all, the first thing most visitors notice about a Park property is the look. Although they are not small properties (and certainly the chain's city hotels all dwarf The Park at Vembanad Lake), they are all identifiably designer-driven boutique hotels, with a look that owes not a little to Terence Conran. It's not as sharply defining a look as, say, that of a Philippe Starck, which is probably one step further along the continuum of furnishing-to-form, but every interior is indeed stylised, with clean lines and the use of local and exotic materials that tend to arrest the eye or guide it.

**I**t's not that this is a particularly new idea. To a nitpicker at the top end of the luxury market, such design is possibly a rather dated concept, a bit 2003 or thereabouts, if you're being charitable. In India, however, it's proven a very effective way to keep a distinct look and feel for the group's properties. The Park at Vembanad Lake is different from the rest of the chain, though, since unlike the others, which are all city hotels that cater primarily, though not solely, to business travellers, this one is a much smaller luxury resort aimed squarely at the leisure traveller, catering to a fraction of the number of guests that might ordinarily be using one of its larger siblings.

And yet the differentiation by design works here, too. The Park at Vembanad Lake has a look and feel about it that is immediately distinct from its rivals. Most tend to fall into one of two categories. If they are larger hotels, anything unique seems liable to disappear at any moment under the blanket of corporate branding,

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If they are smaller boutique outfits, the identity is often something strongly associated with Kerala; often this comes from refurbishing grand old colonial or local structures. They have their merits and are lovely to look at but aren't always the most user-friendly—there is only so much you can do with a heritage structure without some integral architectural compromise, so even the classiest resorts have the odd little rosette that no amount of trick lighting and pretty art can prevent you from thinking, "Nice... dungeon." Once you've seen a few of these, it is actually a relief to enter The Park at Vembanad Lake.

Everything, from the neat uncluttered entrance through the pathway that leads

**The houseboats on Vembanad look mostly alike, especially the so-called luxury boats; the classic kettuvallam, a single hull based on an old rice boat design**



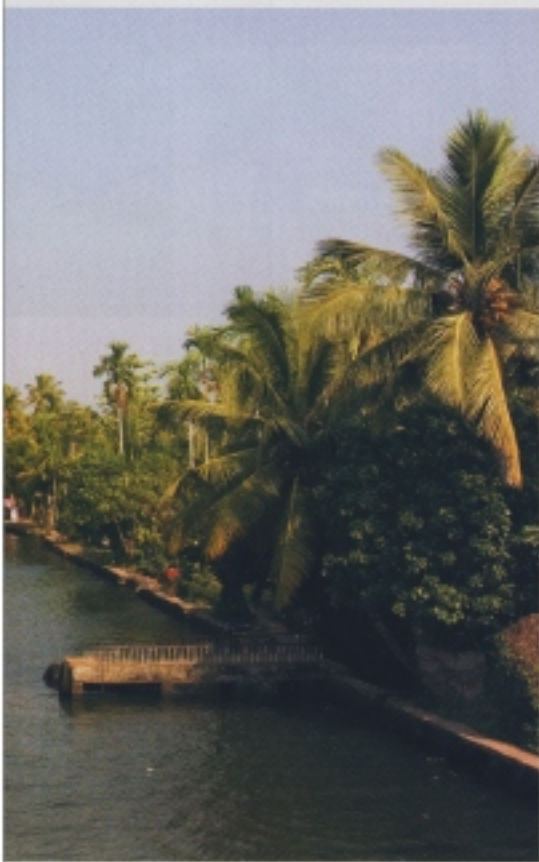
to your room, past the restaurants and the pool, to the rooms themselves, speaks the language of simple, clean lines. Even the shrubbery looks well behaved, but without looking overly manipulated. This is no simple feat in Kerala's feverishly fecund climate. The structures all nod to local and Indian themes, through artwork and the use of some structural materials like the thatch on the roofs.

But the impact is subtle, not in-your-face at all. The clean, almost minimalist lines interfere with nothing, so you're left to savour the view of the backwaters. You walk into your room and you know it was designed as a hotel room and wasn't some long-dead matriarch's pick-

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le storeroom. And you can even see out clearly, to where the waters of Lake Vembanad's western shore gently lap against the stone-lined edge of the property. A few kilometres away, you can just see the eastern shore of the lake. Lots of India and Kerala in particular is so crowded and built-up that anyone can feel hemmed in. The great pleasure of being by Lake Vembanad, which can be up to 14km across at points along its 96-kilometre length, is the sense of a huge, peaceful space that you get as soon as you're within sight of the shore. The lake and this sense of relaxed space

**Clockwise from below: the interiors of a cabin in the Apsara; saloon and dining area, also in the boat; its spa; and a houseboat on the backwaters**





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### THE INFORMATION



**GETTING THERE** **BY AIR** The Park on Vembanad Lake is 30km from Kochi International Airport at Nedumbassery. Expect a close to two-hour journey from the airport, unless traffic is unusually light. All major domestic airlines fly to Kochi (tickets from Rs 3,700 ex-Delhi and Rs 3,100 ex-Mumbai). **BY RAIL** The nearest railhead is Kottayam (Rs 2,174 on 2A from Delhi on the Kerala Express; Rs 1,747 from Mumbai on the Kanyakumari Express).

### THE RESORT

> **THE PARK ON VEMBANAD LAKE** has 10 rooms and a suite. There is also a tented spa, a gym, an outdoor restaurant and performance space, and a swimming pool. **SPECIAL OFFER** Rs 12,000 for a deluxe lake view room to Rs 19,500 for the Vembanad suite. Valid until August 31, 2010. The rates are on a per-night basis, for a minimum stay of two nights and do not include a 15 per cent luxury tax.

> The **APSARA** has eight cabins and can accommodate up to 16 guests. **SUMMER RATES** Rs 99,000 (double) for a three-night/four-day stay. The rates include meals, two-way transfers from the airport, daily cruising, local sightseeing and taxes. **CONTACT:** 0478-25844304; [www.theparkhotels.com](http://www.theparkhotels.com)

**WHAT TO SEE & DO** Given the weather, it's probably best to stay indoors. However, if you care to venture out, the **bird sanctuary** in Kunnarakom, on the banks of Vembanad lake, is worth visiting for its large variety of local and migratory birds. The nearby hill stations of **Elaveezha Poonchira** and **Wagamon** offer good trekking opportunities and some relief from the heat. For those looking to shop, **Kottayam** is just a short drive away. See <http://kottayamvishin.com>.



is the reason I've been so enthused about the design, because it never challenges the primacy of this wonderful peace; it simply complements what you're seeing so well.

Of course, if you're at this particular resort, there is something else you can't help seeing: the 28-metre-long *Apsara* docked at a floating jetty. Although it's a lot bigger than your typical backwater houseboat, a certain attention to design means that this too manages to look unusual yet non-interfering. The houseboats on Vembanad look mostly alike, especially the so-called luxury boats; the

classic *kettuwallam*, a single hull based on an old rice boat design with a thatched covering over a wood-framed cabin. The back will feature all the effluvia of a grubby kitchen, a couple of stacked air-conditioning units and, more often than not, the crew's laundry fluttering on the breeze that skims across the lake.

At peak tourist season, there are actual traffic jams; with the boats all lined up, it could as well be a cookie-cutter production line. So much for the unique travel experience when you're waiting in a line of apparent clones.

Clockwise from this image: the pool at night; deluxe suite in the Park at Vembanad Lake; restaurant and bar with a pool view; and the pool



**The Apsara's designers have clearly spent more time looking at yachts in Cannes rather than in Kumarakom. The result is a very contemporary sensibility that does acknowledge local culture**

Fortunately, the *Apsara* is entirely different. It's a twin-hulled boat, a catamaran, and it's nearly a third longer and a lot wider than the average luxury boat. That makes it a much more stable platform for doing even more of what one does best on a backwaters holiday—all those fine-dining and spa-based indulgences—but all while the *Apsara* glides smoothly over Vembanad's waters.

That smoothness is also reflected in the appointments—the *Apsara*'s designers have clearly spent more time looking at yachts in Cannes rather than in Kumarakom. The result is a very contemporary sensibility that acknowledges local culture in just the same way that the rooms on shore do, through thoughtful

**It never challenges the primacy of the Vembanad Lake's wonderful peace; it simply complements what you're seeing so well**

detailing rather than grand concept.

It is naturally a style that takes a few risks. But that's just as well, because the sheer variety of visitors to Kerala means that a lot of markets are being inadequately addressed. If your tastes run to the baroque, or if you're looking for a place to take 20 colleagues from the bank and their families, or for a holiday that doubles as a history lesson, this may not be your best option. But if you're the sort of person to whom the merits of a Raza painting or Bijoy Jain building need no great explanation, or even if you simply like understated contemporary design, the opening of The Park on Vembanad Lake has narrowed your options enormously. ●