

TRAVEL

ESCAPE TO THE SEA OF TRANQUILITY

The sights and smells of sleepy Kerala are a million miles from the frantic India **Laura Harding** had pictured

SPRAWLED out on cushions on the bow of a houseboat, drifting along a river in glorious sunshine, I am a world away from the India I imagined.

The scenery is lush and green, palm trees line the banks and brightly coloured laundry flickers on washing lines. Children clamber up to the highest branches and jump into the water while fishermen sit in peaceful vigil.

I've travelled to India before, I've seen Slumdog Millionaire, this is not what I was expecting.

But I'm in Kerala, one of the smallest states, and dubbed God's own country by proud locals.

It's not hard to see why. Any of the chaos, noise, poverty and pollution you might expect from a visit to India don't seem to exist here.

Some people say they are intimidated by the prospect of a trip to South Asia's biggest country, they are worried they won't be able to handle the smells, the begging children, even the spicy food. But Kerala could not be less intimidating - from the warm and welcoming smiles of the locals to the stunning landscapes, blissful beaches and coconut-infused food.

I've spent three lovely days on the MV Apsara, cruising around the famous backwaters, breaking briefly from sunbathing, sightseeing and sipping on watermelon juice for an invigorating ayurvedic massage.

But it is on this houseboat, much smaller than the boat where I have been sleeping, that really convinces me of Kerala's charms, and that's even before the captain lets me grab hold of the wheel.

The real world feels a million miles away, it's almost impossible to re-



member the noise of a city. The only sound I can hear are children splashing in the water or a fisherman casting his net.

When I return to the mainland, I take a stroll through Puthanangadi, the village where the floating boutique hotel is moored.

There's a festival going on and the children are lighting candles in front of the temple but they come running over when they see strange faces.

The little ones hardly speak any English but can't wait to have their pictures taken or show off some basic yoga poses.

It's hard to leave such a tranquil place but fresh from my watery adventures, I head east to the spice plantations of Thekkady.

Arriving at the beautiful Spice Vil-

lage, set amid eight acres of forest, the first thing I want to do is sniff everything.

I am presented with beautifully aromatic mint tea as soon as I arrive and from then on all I do is soak up spicy smells.

Every seemingly normal tree is actually harbouring wonderfully aromatic spices and the place is an eco heaven.

Much of the resort is self-sufficient and the whole place aims to be as environmentally sustainable as possible. As well as the simple but spacious huts where guests sleep, the resort houses a huge vegetable garden, a place where they make their own paper, and an ever-growing expanse of solar panels.

My favourite feature is the open-air 50 Mile restaurant, where none of the produce has travelled more than that distance, meaning it's all fresh and locally sourced.

After feasting on basil quail kebabs and a huge selection of vegetarian curries, all washed down with Indian wine, I am ready to pledge never to eat food that has travelled in a plane ever again.

All this wonderful food makes me eager to join one of the Spice Village's cookery demonstrations.

One of the lovely chefs has abandoned his dinner preparations to teach a group of us how to whip up a cinnamon masala curry.

The sight of the mirror set up above his head so we can see into the pans is completely mesmerising, as are the delicious smells quickly heading my way.

This is made even better when we get to eat the curry. The lovely staff hand over a beautiful box of spices as



a leaving gift, so I have no excuse not to put my new culinary tips to good use now.

Exhausted from the strain of drinking cocktails, sniffing spices and watching somebody else cook for me, I zig-zag back across the country, making the five-hour journey to the Marari Beach Resort on the tropical Malabar coast.

It's hard to sum up how blissful it is here but the luxury and thoughtfulness is probably best summarised by the set-up on the beach.

Huge comfy hammocks swing from palm trees and off to the side of each one is a big red flag. Need a snack? A drink? A fresh towel? Just hoist the flag. It's easy to see why

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You'll never walk alone

Mark Nicholls heads to the holiday island of Crete to walk the Samaria Gorge and check out the beaches and places to stay

THE rugged beauty and scale of Crete's Samaria Gorge is breathtaking. The hike through it is a seemingly endless descent into Europe's longest natural fissure, over 16km of rocky pathways carved out of an ancient river bed.

The route takes you past an abandoned village and ancient church before you spill out onto a black sandy beach.

With no road link to the coastal village of Agia Roumeli, the only way out is by ferry to Chora Sfakion further along the shoreline.

A pre-dawn drive along the winding roads through the White Mountains takes you to the top of the gorge near the village of Omalos some 1250 metres above sea level.

As day breaks the air is fresh, in con-

trast to the heat of a Cretan summer, but the early start ensures much of the walking is behind you by the time the temperature begins to seriously rise.

Sturdy walking boots are essential to negotiate the rugged downward path through the pine and cypress trees and there is a sense of relief when it finally levels out onto the river bed with the water flowing close by, supplying regular fountains to fill bottles.

Around half way loom the remains of the village of Samaria and the abandoned 14th century church of Ossia Maria, which gives the gorge its name. Pause for a snack before pressing on to the later stages where the gorge narrows as the sheer walls soar upwards.

The narrowest point is a mere three metres across, before it opens onto the beach at Agia Roumeli, a small community of overnight rests and tavernas where a beer and a Greek salad and a dip in the sea are most welcome before boarding the ferry.

Western Crete has become one of my favourite holiday destinations, and the 33-room Mistral Hotel at Maleme, a few miles from the delightful Venetian port city of Chania is a good place to enjoy it. Specialising in solo travellers, it has perfected the art of singles holidays over the last two decades.

Run by brothers Vassilis and Andonis Gialamarakis and their families, it has two beautiful pools, quiet landscaped gardens and a welcoming bar. There is also an attractive restaurant where you can enjoy traditional dishes such as beef stifado or souvlaki, stuffed tomatoes and peppers and superb salads, dressed in olive oil produced by the hotel from its own trees, all washed down with good local wine.

The Mistral also prides itself on showing Crete as it is through its off-the-beaten-track excursions. One leads to the perfect quiet beach of Falasarna with its expanse of fine sand and clear waters, followed by a lunch, which drifts



SILENT NIGHT: Sunset over the Kerala backwaters, South India; left a houseboat, and inset, the MV Apsara luxury cruiser

Paul McCartney chose this place for his honeymoon with Heather Mills.

I'm spoilt for life and that's before I've even set foot in the ayurvedic centre.

Ayurvedic massage uses plant-based treatments to maintain the health of mind and spirit and the treatment I have involves two women constantly pouring warm oil over me while massaging me from head to toe.

Before I slide off the table and into oblivion they put me in the shower and exfoliate my skin so well it's soft and glowing for ages afterwards.

When I finally wander back to my huge beach hut, complete with outdoor bathroom, I am in such a daze

I need to take a few minutes to compose myself.

An early morning yoga session brings me back down to earth. Eating so well for so long has not made me more flexible but my teacher, Gopal, is so warm and encouraging, I am offering sun salutations in no time.

Gopal has been doing yoga for 50 years but it's hard to imagine he's a day older than that. When he shows off his most impressive poses at the end of the class, it doesn't seem impossible to believe he's been working on them since birth.

Sprawled out on the floor watching him, I can see how 50 years spent in Kerala could do wonders for your mind, body and soul.

TRAVEL FACTS

LAURA HARDING was a guest of Saga Holidays, which offers 12-night Soul of Kerala packages in October from £2299. Package includes excursions, a Saga tour manager and return flights on Emirates from Gatwick, Manchester or Birmingham airport to Cochin, via Dubai. Business class upgrades available for a supplement. Door-to-door VIP travel is included from anywhere in the UK plus travel insurance, tourist visa and additional cancellation cover, all breakfasts, three lunches and all dinners. For reservations visit www.saga.co.uk/ in India or call 0800-414 383.

on a singles holiday in Crete

on into late afternoon, at a family restaurant tucked away in the quiet cove at Sfinari.

Enjoy freshly-caught fish, a range of seafood, wine, and the irresistible Kaka-va (fish soup) on the menu.

Other excursions include trips to Elafonisi beach, where the pinkish hue of the shoreline is created by millions of crushed shell fragments; or a boat trip to Gramvousa island for snorkelling, swimming and exploring Venetian ruins.

This year The Mistral has expanded, with six luxurious villas a few miles further on from Maleme, each with great views over the Bay of Kissamos. Built on the hillside above Agios Georgios, the villas sit close to the ruins of an ancient temple and the historic St Constantine Chapel. Designed by a leading Athens architect they are ideal for couples and families. Each has its own pool and terrace and colossal windows under the brand of You-Phoria Villas.

As the largest of the Greek islands, Crete has so much to offer, including an ancient Minoan history, picturesque harbours with shoreline tavernas, small inlets where colourful fishing boats bob on the tide, a rugged landscape, superb food, and a warm and welcoming people. Perhaps that is why I keep going back.

TRAVEL FACTS

Accommodation: The Mistral opens from April to October. Guests book the hotel independently and arrange their own flights, though the Mistral arranges transfers. A typical week's stay, half-board, starts from about £525 per person. For bookings and further information, visit www.singlesincrete.com, email info@singlesincrete.com or call 0871-990 2070. The YouPhoria villas can be rented for a few days, a week or more. Visit www.youphoriavillascrete.com



LATE DEALS

THAILAND: Turquoise Holidays has eight nights at La Flora Resort & Spa, Khao Lak from just £895 per person including flights with Thai Airways and transfers, only an hour from Phuket airport. Valid for travel 16 April-31 October, based on two sharing. Call 01494-678 400 or visit www.turquoiseholidays.co.uk.

ST PETERSBURG: Stay at the three-star Ibis Hotel, three nights B&B from Edinburgh on 4 May for £375 per person based on two sharing including transfers. Visit www.jet2holidays.com, call 0800-408 5594.

NEW YORK: www.net-flights.com can offer three nights at the five-star Waldorf Astoria in New York, room only, from Glasgow with British Airways from £819. Valid for departures 23-24 May. Book by 31 March.

HOTEL DEAL: Travelodge is offering thousands of rooms at its UK airport sites from just £21. Airport sites include Gatwick, Heathrow, Stansted, London City, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds Bradford, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Stays are between 22 March-30 April in Travelodge airport hotels. To book visit www.travelodge.co.uk.

MADRID & SEVILLE: Explore the cultural wealth of Spain's capital before heading south to Seville and losing yourself in a maze of narrow, medieval lanes and hidden plazas. Six nights from £569pp staying at three-star hotels, departing from Edinburgh on June 4 with Cities Direct. Call 01242-536900 or visit www.citiesdirect.co.uk

LONDON'S LEGACY: Soak up the Olympic experience this Easter or April with a weekend break in Holiday Inn London - Stratford City from £75 per room per night. The deal, which includes B&B for two people, is valid for weekends only (Fri-Sun) from Friday 29 March until Sunday 14 April. Set in the Olympic Park, guests can experience the new 'Park in Progress' Tours (www.visitlondon.com) or shop in Westfield Stratford City. Contact 020-3301 4040, quote 'OlympicEaster' or visit www.hilondonstratford.co.uk.

SCOTTISH COTTAGES: Unique Cottages have a number of properties including Cruinn Leium Round House, which was first conceived as a recording studio. Sleeping two, it is set in on the Applecross peninsula in the North West Highlands. Prices in the low season for a seven-night holiday start at £370, rising to £625. Kirklaw House, a stunning conver-

sion of an historic building dating back to 1626, sleeping ten, costs £895 for a seven-night holiday, rising to £1595 in July and August. Call 01835-822277 or visit www.unique-cottages.co.uk.

EASTER CANARIES CRUISES: Picknrcruise (0131-443 0766) has cabins reduced from £595p/p on seven-night Thomson Majesty cruises flying direct from Edinburgh on either 29 March or 5 April visiting Tenerife, Gran Canaria, La Palma, Madeira and either Lanzarote and Agadir on 5 April or Fuerteventura and La Gomera on 29 March.

SAIL CROATIA: Sail Croatia (www.sail-croatia.com 0800-193 8289) has seven-night Saturday departures throughout April from just £319 per person with breakfast, lunch and an experienced on-board tour guide. Journey between Split and Dubrovnik, stopping off for swimming and snorkelling, kayaking, walking tours, buggy safaris and seeing Croatia's famous sights and ports. Norwegian airline will be starting routes from Gatwick to both Split and Dubrovnik in April with return flights starting from £58.20.

TRAVEL TURKEY: Encounters Travel (www.encounterstravel.com, 0800 088 6002) is offering a ten-day Anatolian Adventure tour from just £559 per person excluding flights. Available for departure on 27 April, the price includes airport transfers from/to Istanbul, accommodation in four and five-star hotels with breakfast and some meals and the services of a local tour leader. Visit Troy, Pergamum and Ephesus before following the ancient silk road to Cappadocia and Ankara, and end with another night in Istanbul.

DUTCH BULBFIELDS: Enjoy a two-night mini-cruise to Keukenhof in Holland from Newcastle to see the tulips in full bloom over 85 acres of formal gardens, parkland and green houses. From £103pp based on two sharing, the package includes two nights in an en-suite cabin, return coach transfers and entrance to Keukenhof. Departs Newcastle on April 11, 13, 18, 23, 26 and 29 and May 3 and 8. To book visit www.dfds.co.uk or call 0871-522 9976

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