



PHOTO: All photos by Hema Narayan

Everyone visiting this Indian state will be enchanted by the narrow, verdant stretch of land that is sandwiched between the mighty Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea - Kerala. Why wouldn't they, when 44 pristine rivers, originating from the mountains flows down with vigour, to the sea-washed, palm-fringed beaches, throughout the 500 km of length? Like any traveller, varied facets of Kerala enamoured me too, on each of my trips. But, my recent experience at Fort Kochi was distinct and new, as I visited an ecotourism model-fishing village at Kumbalangi, located near the port city of Kochi in Ernakulam.

After being driven to a ferry point, 16 km outside Kochi, we were greeted by a boatman in a special country boat that was decked in white satin and had special seats. The oarman offered a thoughtful keepsake - a foldable cap made of bamboo sticks - and then took up the oars. A glimpse across the waters revealed the existence of an island, with people going about their activities at an unhurried pace. We set sail through the vast stretch of backwaters, connected by interlocking waterways to the entire state. It was blissful, with silence all around. Sitting beside the prow of the canoe, I was surrounded by palm trees and a ring of Chinese fishing nets.



Seeing India
by **Hema Narayan**

A Natural Way of Life

KUMBALANGI, A SERENE FISHING HAMLET FACING THE KOCHI BACKWATERS, IS UNIQUE IN THAT ITS INHABITANTS DEPEND ON NATURE FOR EVERYTHING - LITTLE WONDER THEN THAT IT IS INDIA'S FIRST DESIGNATED ECOTOURISM VILLAGE

The island was unspoiled by commercialism or the arrival of hordes of tourists.

Kumbalangi, the brainchild of Kerala Tourism, is aimed at showcasing the work of the local people. It is a serene fishing hamlet facing the Kochi backwaters, and its inhabitants depend on nature for their survival. I also learnt that it is India's first designated ecotourism village and the first rural tourism village in the state. Called the Kumbalangi Integrated Tourism Village, this project was set up in 2003 to help the economy and the locals. The 16 sq.km. island is rich in aquatic life, and this explained why fishing is the

main occupation. Some of the locals told me that bait fishing is extremely popular among tourists here. Mangroves were scattered here and there, separating the land from the water. The locals use the space as a breeding ground for prawns, crabs, oysters and fishes - which might have triggered the idea of setting up farms to demonstrate the process of catching and filtering oysters to visitors.

When our boat touched land, we were greeted warmly by the residents of Kumbalangi. One of the men briskly walked towards a coconut tree, climbed it with unassuming ease, plucked some tender coconuts and offered them as a welcome



drink! The fresh, sweet water and soft pulp were much better tasting than the ones we had tasted in cities. Plantations of coconuts, pepper, raw plantains, betel nuts, jackfruit, nutmeg, orchids, vanilla and anthurium are seen all over the island.

The island is home to farmers, fishermen, toddy tappers, labourers, and coir spinners. We met a few women who wanted to showcase their skills in making ropes from coir. While one woman spun the wheel of the manually operated loom, around six women on either side fed the wheel with coconut fibres. The fibres were entwined together to form thick ropes. When I held the finished rope in my hand, I could tell that it was probably strong enough to pull a boat out from the sea! Nothing went to waste. For instance, dried coconut leaves were put to good use by weaving them into intricate baskets; an elderly woman used fresh green leaves to weave a broad mat. The thinner strips at the centre of the leaves were used to make broomsticks.

When we saw the first signs of a drizzle, we took shelter in one of residents' houses, where we were treated to hot tea. The home was adjacent to the backwaters, and faced over one hundred Chinese fishing nets. While talking to the lady of the house, I gathered that homes on the island are rented out as homestays for visitors.

If sweet alcoholic beverages are your thing, toddy (or palm wine, as some call it) made fresh from the sap of the





palm tree might be worth a try. I was told that it is mildly intoxicating, unlike the fermented toddy (with its stale-cider taste) that is sold at roadside toddy shops. To me, it was a treat to watch the toddy tapper climb up the palm tree and carry the sour drinks in a pot tied to his back. Nevertheless, I chose to remain sober.

And how could I not mention the farms that were set up to breed crabs, oysters and fish? For the first time, I was up close with a crab that tried to crawl towards my toe. The fisherman cast his net aesthetically into a small stretch of the backwaters with bait, demonstrating how he caught a crab, a prawn or a large fish. The highlight was his holding a live crab in his hand - without a trace of fear! The process of extracting the oysters was another interesting experience. The oysters are boiled with their shells in water, and later extracted.

By the time we were done watching, the lunch bell was sounded and typical Kerala-style lunch awaited us. The memories of having a hearty meal with the residents, while enjoying the view of the backwaters is a memory I will cherish. Soon it was time to bid adieu to Kumbalangi. For me, this model village was a unique getaway, and a veritable treat - one I would surely come back to.