

INDIA'S TWO FACES

Despite having one of the longest coastlines in the world,

India has yet to exploit its potential for watersports. This extremely vast country offers optimal conditions for SUP, be it for a leisurely cruise as well as world-class surfing conditions. **Carine Camboulives** and **Manu Bouvet** invite you on a trip to discover these two very distinct environments.

From our first trip to Kerala, South India, over 10 years ago, I had left with the conviction that I would one day return, knowing very well how little of these promises stand the test of time. Back then, we had, during a month long journey, followed the coast of Kerala, heading north east and making our way up the Tamil Nadu region. We found good conditions for windsurfing and a few beach breaks, the colour of Masala tea (brown from all the rain that time of year). Beyond the conditions, we were fascinated by the flow in which such a dense and mixed population manages to coexist. The kaleidoscope of colours, spices and aromas that fills the air in this part of India, seems to ignite in a culinary firework, to our greatest delight!

Several years later, and with two adorable little girls at our side, our passion for SUP renders our return to India unquestionable. SUP is the ideal tool with which to experience India along its waters and to discover its most beautiful waves.



The backwaters

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For over a century, in Kerala, south west India, exotic local barges have navigated the backwaters, this network of lagoons parallel to the Arabian Sea, away from the Malabar Coast. We embark on one of these amazing SUP experiences we could ever imagine.

Sinju, our captain, stands at the bow of his kettuvallam. In Malayam, the spoken language of Kerala, kettu means, 'held by ropes' and vallam means, 'boat'. We embark quite late and Sinju worries about the falling tide, which will soon prevent us from leaving. The large bags we hastily stack behind his command post intrigue his crewmen, as well as himself. They have never before seen a stand up paddleboard and we ourselves have never seen a 'houseboat'.

Ours for the next four days is emblematic of these big, singularly crafted boats with unique history. Used since the early 20th century to transport rice and spices, the kettuvallam found them docked in the 70s with the development of highways. From then on deemed unnecessary, these barges would surely have been vowed to extinction had it not been for the ingenuity of some of the witnesses of the ever-growing tourism in this region, coming up with the idea of turning them into cruise boats.

The comparison is not an easy one with our own stand up paddleboards, if only that they were also created with the idea of turning something old into new.

Our houseboat slowly leaves its homeport in lake Vembanad, south of Cochin, between the tea Plantation Mountains and the Indian Ocean, just in time before the tide has entirely receded. It is the middle of May, just before the start of the monsoon (expected June 1st), and the hottest month of the year. The sky is clear and a thin veil tries in vain to soften the burning heat of the sun. We travel at a very slow pace during the entire journey. The houseboats are long, large and heavy and perfectly adapted to the calm backwaters. For once, we need not worry about our two daughters, seven-year old Lou and 16-month old Shadé: no rough crossings, no seasickness and most importantly – no fear of them going overboard. Shadé, who has started walking already, continues her progress aboard the boat. This cruise is undoubtedly set out to be a smooth one.

Before heading to bed the crew serves us one of those dinners that have been delighting us since our arrival. It is 10 years later and the flavours of Kerala have not aged a bit.

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Our journey on the backwaters is one of pure contemplation and perfectly satisfying to the inactive traveller. But it has to take on a different and more active aspect for us, once we set our boards on the water, which we do as soon as we wake up the next morning. Tied down along a canal, under a huge mango tree falling under the weight of still unripe fruit, I set Lou out on the water as the sun slowly rises. I am overcome by the peacefulness that surrounds us. On the opposite bank a man bathes his cow while a group of women washes their clothes and looks over indifferently. An Epinal print of an everlasting India, far from that of the vast cities of exponential sizes, boosted by an economic growth envied by the rest of the world.

I realize that what I am seeing that morning has always been here, and remains untouched, little or nothing in our surroundings are indicative of this day and age... that is until Lou makes her way on her stand up paddle. I am not sure whether it is the never before seen vehicle or the fact that a blond little girl is standing on top of it, but all eyes turn her way and smiles light up. I jump on my board to join her and go over to meet this crowd of locals, going about their business along the banks. What an extraordinary way to meet people and not just be a plain spectator to these scenes of daily life. These are the moments I had hoped to live on this journey along the backwaters.

Carine is calling me from our boat. She rigs me with a baby carrier in which she comfortably installs Shadé, who is delighted at the prospect of a morning cruise. The four of us paddle along until we run into a temple on the riverbank. A few worshippers welcome us as we approach and one of them, rapidly and with great precision, applies a mark on each of our foreheads. It is a vegetable powder, usually sandalwood, applied as protection on what the Hindus call the 'third eye' or 'sixth chakra'.

It is the eye of self-knowledge centred right above the eyebrows.

After being blessed, we penetrate the open-air temple, made of several small alcoves where offerings are placed at the feet of the multiple deity represented there. Today's ceremony celebrates the first day of the monsoon cycle or rainy season, putting an end to several months of drought. We pray that it will bring fertility to the fields. The worshippers are chanting prayers; the sounds, colours and smells are a journey within the journey. Lou is in awe of Ganesh, the god of intelligence, with his four arms and elephant face. We leave the temple taking care not to turn our backs to the deity and slowly go about our way. There is no motive to be hasty here, neither on the water nor on land. Life unravels in such slow motion and with a certain nonchalance that seems to defy the course of time. I notice, as I often do when I travel, that slow pace has much more to reveal than speed. Being so close to the coast and standing over the water like we do on a stand up board, turn this cruise into a beautiful way to discover the coastline, and miss nothing along the way.

The start of the monsoon is also the start of the low touristy season. There are few houseboats left, many are out of the water for repair and maintenance. Built almost entirely from natural materials, the houseboats have a very low environmental impact. A great advantage considering the ecological condition of the backwaters, often criticized for the pollution of its water, where almost all of the local household waste is dumped. Indeed the water here is not inviting and is advised against for swimming, although locals here bathe in it daily. Carine cannot resist the urge to freshen up a bit and Pierre, our photographer, joyfully dives in with his camera housing. They are both still in great health to this day, maybe it's from not swallowing the water...



One evening, atop of my stand up, as all I could distinguish through the milky white light were shapes and contours, a fisherman calls out to me from his outrigger canoe.

A few paddles later and I am sitting on my board conversing with this elder man, with a thin white moustache. We slowly paddle together into the dusk and I understand that he is taking off to go fish for the night. I watch him speed up until I see him motion me to start racing. I happily play along, but can feel him struggling to keep up, and as a respect to his older age I decide that I should slow down, when suddenly he catches up and I am now the one making an effort to stay level with him. He stops suddenly out of breath and shows me his heart with his hand. After a short moment of worry we find ourselves sitting next to each other once again and finally we arrive back at the houseboat. With a sparkle in his eye, he reaches below his bench and pulls out a small bottle of local rum, pours a generous glass that he downs in one go before lighting up a cigarette!

"I am 74 years old and I need a little pick me up to last the night on my canoe" he tells Sinju, who translates for me. I am amazed and still trying to catch my breath!

The backwaters are like an open-air theatre between land and water, where daily life scenes are constantly played out. Their perfect aesthetics could be mistaken for a made up setting, a staging that the spectator would never tire of admiring. If he is unafraid, like Carine, Lou, Shadé and I, to jump in the water and stand up on a board, then he becomes himself an actor in this real life play. The most beautiful one there is.

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the colours of India



‘Two fingers to precaution!
Indian ferry or not, pirates
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The ocean

If this chapter of our trip is smooth and leisurely, sailing comfortably to the rhythms of the tide, it certainly awakens our desire for more adventure. The rest of our trip has all the ingredients to satisfy it: uncertainty, the unknown, insecurity and the need for freedom.

Obtaining from the Indian administration the permit to visit the island we have set out for is discouraging to say the least. In comparison it makes any French administrative quest seem like a pleasurable moment. Our destination had in fact become, a few years ago, an al Qaida ‘hideout’, and the Indian government was asked from then on to take back the control over its

territory. Hence the over-zealousness of all sorts. However, the Somali pirates who regularly attack the ships in this region, know there is nothing to expect from the government; the thousands of crewmen put aboard these ships by the merchant navy are not worth a rupee in ransom...

To embark for these islands, one has to resist the song of the sirens – not the one Ulysses and his men had to fear – but the overwhelming warnings against everything and everyone.

I cannot seem to get used to this constant quest for security in which our societies seem to confine themselves. We see precaution as a virtue while on the contrary it is mostly an excuse for

giving up, ultimate pretext to take no risks, attempt or undertake anything new, in plain, not to live at all! It is for that matter one of the big issues around watersports, because of its risky nature!

Patrice Franceschi has perfectly illustrated this, “No other choice: you must agree to uncertainty, insecurity: it is the price to pay to regain part of our freedom” (from his essay ‘Et si l’aventure, c’était l’esprit d’aventure’ – ‘What if adventure itself was the spirit of adventure’).

In this adventurous state of mind, we embark on the ferry on our way overseas. For too long I have dreamt of these islands (two thirds are

inaccessible to non-Indian visitors) and I will not let these warnings deter me. “Two fingers to precaution! Indian ferry or not, pirates or not, al Qaida or not, we are going... or at least we are trying!”

Knowing when this ferry is leaving is not easy, but getting to know when it comes back is a plain mystery: “When is the return?” I ask to the person in charge. He answers me by bobbing his head in this typical Indian manner that always delights me, and that can mean pretty much anything. “Monsoon starting, maybe no boat if bad weather,” he says after a while.

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Leaving without knowing when you'll return has to be the true way of traveling. Gerard Chaliand, traveller and poet, suggests an answer to this by saying, “The cultural wealth of knowing the world, paid by physical risk, accepted insecurity and attachment to independence, is priceless.” I



quest for waves but we come back touched by one single image, a sound, and an atmosphere. I am sitting on my SUP; Carine passes by me heading towards the peak. We've been here long enough to have forgotten about what day it is. We are now used to watching the wave peel in perfection, just for us. When the swell is big, the wave takes on a different aspect, take off is impressive and the lip throws wide on shallow water.

Lou goes back to shore after a small frightful episode on her SUP. She doesn't quite realize how close she gets to the rocks. She's back on the beach with her sister Shadé, who's being spoiled by Rashidu, our dedicated 'helper' since our arrival. A few moments later I look up towards the pier and see Lou who is at the back of Rashidu's motorcycle with Shadé sandwiched between the two of them. “Daddy” she shouts with a huge grin on her face, “we're going to have tea at Rashidu's house”. Carine's delighted smile is her best answer, and they disappear into the small path leading to the medina.



We believe we are on a **quest for waves**
but we come back touched by

one single image,
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share his set of values and count on them to elevate us above this massive thirst for security.

But what was I finding at all corners of the world? Why do I always want to see further? Over time I realize that the treasures of traveling are not the ones we think. We believe we are on a





Today, months after our return, I remember this moment of completeness most vividly.

A time where all seems to fall into place, where everyone is living entirely in the moment, without any apprehensions or restraint towards the location and the people around us. What matters most is the emotion, not the action or the surroundings. It is her spirit that I felt I had pierced through for a brief instant that day. To experience this I had shed enough of my fears, fantasies and clichés, which, even when maintained in a state of clinical death, can come alive again when experiencing such cultural and geographical distance.

We carry on surfing this perfect right-hander, knowing that our daughters are being spoiled like princesses by all of Rashidu's aunts, sisters, cousins and neighbours.

The offshore breeze carries smells of burning trash from the shore. Goats rummage through it looking for something to eat, next to cows quietly grazing under the coconut trees. From time to time, children will gather under the shade of the big tree that hangs over the end of the wave. Along with the animals, they are the only few spectators of our sessions, making the long ferry hours and past fears now seem totally ridiculous.

We must awaken the spirit of adventure that lies in us in order to experience strong emotions like these and to go towards a better understanding of the world. Olivier Frébourg has great advice in this regard, "Let go of everything! Nowadays, adventure is the sky and the sea resisting against virtual world's slavery!"

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Kerala coastline
India