



COASTAL KERALA

A FAMILY'S SOUL SUPING EXPERIENCE IN INDIA

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Words: Manu Bouvet - Photos: Pierre Bouras

Despite having one of the longest coastlines in the world, India has yet to reach its potential in terms of water sports. This extremely vast country offers optimal conditions for SUP, be it for a leisurely cruise or a world class surf. Travel with Carine Camboulives, Manu Bouvet and their two young daughters on a trip of adventure and inner discovery to the protected coastal waterways and dynamic waves of southeast India's colorful Kerala province.

From our first trip to southern India over 10 years ago, I came away with the conviction that someday I would return, knowing well how few of these promises stand the test of time. Back then, our month long journey followed the coast of Kerala Province, making our way to the Tamil Nadu region at the very southern tip of the sub-continent. We found good conditions for windsurfing, and a few beach breaks the color of Massala tea, brown from rain runoff at that time of year. Beyond the sea conditions, we were fascinated by the flow with which such a densely populated and mixed culture manages to coexist. Out of this cultural diversity, a kaleidoscope of colors, spices, and aromas fill the air, igniting a culinary fireworks display!

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

On-shore: Aquatic labyrinth of Kerala

For over a century, exotic local barges have navigated the backwaters of Kerala through a network of lagoons that parallel the Arabian Sea. We decide to use one of these barges as our base for a SUP exploration of these lovely, tranquil waterways.

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 could soon prevent us from leaving. He and his crewmen are intrigued by the large bags we hastily stack behind his command post. They have never seen a Stand Up Paddle board, while we have never seen a houseboat.

The large, remarkably crafted boats have a unique history. Used since the early 20th century to transport rice and spices, the kettuvallam became obsolete in the '70s with the development of highways. Deemed unnecessary, these barges would surely have been condemned to extinction had it not been for ingenuity from within the growing tourism industry; the kettuvallam now enjoy vibrant second lives as tourist cruise boats.



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Our houseboat slowly leaves its home port in Lake Vembanad, south of Cochin, between the mountains draped in tea plantations and the southern Arabian Sea. The tide has almost receded, but we slip away just in time. It is the middle of May, the hottest month of the year, just before the start of the monsoon. The sky is clear and a thin veil of cloud 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 Lou, 7 years old, and Shadé, 16 months; no rough crossings, no seasickness, and most importantly no fear of them going overboard. Shadé, who has already started walking, continues her progress aboard the boat. Before heading to bed the crew serves us one of those dinners that have delighted us since our arrival. Ten years after our first visit, the flavors of Kerala have not weakened a bit.

Our journey on the backwaters is one of pure contemplation, and perfectly satisfying to the inactive traveler. But for us it will take on a different and more active aspect once we set our boards on the water. Tied down along a canal, under a huge mango tree drooping under the weight of its 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. This is a classic picture of timeless India, far from the vast cities of exponential growth.

Almost nothing in our surroundings is indicative of this day and age, until Lou makes her way on her stand up paddleboard. I am not sure whether it is the never before seen watercraft, or the fact that a little blond 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 we paddle over to the cluster of locals going about their business along the banks. What an extraordinary way to meet people and to go beyond being a spectator of the scenes of daily life.

A little later, Carine calls me from our boat; she rigs me with a baby carrier and places Shadé comfortably inside. The toddler 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. Made of vegetable powder, usually sandalwood, the mark is applied as protection on what the Hindus call the “third eye” or “6th chakra.” This, of course, is the eye of self-knowledge, centered right above the eyebrows.

After being blessed, we enter the open-air temple, made of several small alcoves where offerings are placed at the feet of the multiple deities represented there. Today’s ceremony is to celebrate the first day of the monsoon, 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, colors 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 water nor on land. Life unravels in slow motion, with a certain nonchalance that seems to defy the course of time. I notice, as I often do when I travel, that a slow pace has much more to reveal than speed. Cruising and standing over the water like we do provides a beautiful way to discover, missing nothing along the way.

The ease of taking a dip in the water is generally one of the great benefits stand up paddling. Here, however, due to household waste dumped in the waterways, the water is not so inviting and we are advised against swimming. Yet Carine cannot resist the urge to freshen up a bit and Pierre, our photographer, joyfully dives in with his camera housing. Neither one of them ended up sick—perhaps they were lucky, or perhaps worrying less is sometimes well rewarded.

One evening atop my stand up, when all I can distinguish through the milky white light are shapes and contours, a fisherman calls out to me from his outrigger canoe. A few paddle strokes later and I am sitting on my board conversing with the elder man, who speaks from behind a thin white mustache. We slowly paddle together into the dusk and I understand that he is on his way to go fishing for the night. I watch him speed up and then see that he is motioning me to start racing. I happily play along, but thinking



I can feel him struggling to keep up and out of respect to his older age, I decide that I should slow down. Suddenly he catches up and then I am the one making an effort to stay level with him. Soon he stops, out of breath, and points to his heart. I worry for a moment but his playful smile encourages me to settle back into paddling along with him. Once back at the houseboat, with another sparkle in his eye the man reaches below his bench and pulls out a small bottle of local rum, pouring himself a generous glass that he downs in one go before lighting up a cigarette. “I am seventy-four 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 sit by, still trying to catch my breath.

The backwaters are like an open-air theater 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 one is unafraid, like Carine, Lou, Shadé and I, to jump in the water and stand up on a board, then it is possible to become an actor in this real life play—the most beautiful one there is.



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Off-shore: The quest for Treasure Island

The smooth and leisurely first chapter of our trip, sailing comfortably to the rhythms of the tide, has awakened our desire for more adventure. The rest of our trip brings all the ingredients to satisfy that desire: uncertainty, insecurity, exploration into the unknown, and the opportunity to move beyond our fears, preconceptions and inner constraints.

Seeking quality waves off the beaten path, we decide to head to a set of islands* off the coast of Kerala. Obtaining the permit from the Indian administration to visit these islands is discouraging to say the least. In comparison it makes any French administrative quest seem pleasurable. Our destination had in fact become, a few years ago, an Al Qaida "hideout," and the Indian government was asked to regain control over the territory. 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 refuse to accept the constant need for security inside which our Western societies live a confined existence. We see precaution as a virtue while on the contrary it is mostly an excuse for giving up, an ultimate pretext to take no risks, attempt or undertake nothing new, or not live at all! Inspired by Patrice Franceschi's essay "Et si l'aventure, c'était l'esprit d'aventure" / "What if adventure itself was the spirit of adventure?," we embark on the ferry overseas. For too long I have dreamed of these islands (two thirds are inaccessible to non Indian visitors), and I will not let the warnings deter me.

Knowing when this ferry is leaving isn't easy, but learning when it comes back is pure mystery. "When is the return?" I ask the person in charge. He answers by wobbling his head side to side in a typical Indian manner that always delights me, but which can mean pretty much anything. "Moonson starting, maybe no boat if bad weather," he says after awhile.

Leaving without knowing when you'll return has to be the truest way to travel. Gerard Chaliand, traveller and poet, suggests: "The cultural wealth of knowing the world, paid by physical risk, accepted insecurity and attachment to independence, is priceless." I share his set of values and count on them to elevate us above the mainstream's massive thirst for security.

Yet I also ask myself, "What am I seeking by wandering to all corners of the world?" Over time I realize that the treasures of traveling are not the ones we think. We believe we are on a quest for waves but we come back touched by one single image, a sound, or the feeling of a moment.

We've been on the island long enough to have forgotten what day it is. I am sitting on my SUP and Carine passes by me heading towards the peak. 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.

*In keeping with the surfing tradition and respecting everyone's own journey of discovery, we choose to not disclose the exact location of the break. Nowadays, more than ever, it is rare and priceless to find an empty, perfect wave just for yourself. For those who really want to get there, they will. Keep searching, it's still out there.





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 towards the pier. Lou is on the back of Rashidu's motorcycle, 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.

Months after our return, I remember this moment most vividly: a flash in time where everything seems to fall into its place and everyone is living entirely in the moment, without apprehension or resistance towards the place or the people around us. The emotion of that instant is what has stayed with me so clearly. To experience it, I had to shed enough of my fears, fantasies, and clichés—the phantoms that can arise from 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 neighbors. The off-shore breeze carries smells of burning trash from the shore. Goats rummage through it looking for something to eat. Cows quietly graze 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 spectators of our sessions. In the simplicity of the present, our past fears and worries disappear like smoke into the endless blue sky.

We must awaken the sleeping spirit of adventure in order to experience emotions like these, and to go towards a better understanding of the world.

INFO BOX

WHEN TO GO: For clear skies and cooler temperatures, anytime from November to May is good. This is the high season for tourism. For waves and fewer crowds, early monsoon months (May/June) are a good bet as they bring waves while the heavy rains are not there yet.

HOW TO GET THERE: Daily flights from London to Kochi.

WHERE TO STAY: For a House boat trip in the Backwaters, contact Rainbowcruises.in. For outer islands getaways: Surfingindia.net

MORE INFO: www.keralatourism.org & www.carinecamboulives.fr

