

A passage through India by boat

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

The first thing one notices when entering Kerala is the water. It is not so much that the entire southeast Indian state is flooded, rather it just doesn't look like it is having any problems getting its fair share. While the rest of India lies parched in the winter drought, Kerala maintains a green and lush feeling even without regular rainfall.

One reason is that it generally rains more there throughout the year. The state effectively has two monsoon seasons — one from May to September, the other from October to December — and eastern mountains make sure that most of that water stays in Kerala.

Such conditions have produced an almost exotically fertile landscape and have lured traders to the area — once known as Malabar — for centuries. They have also created its waterways. The lowlands of the state abound in lakes, rivers and canals, connecting hundreds of rural farming communities. Transport by boat is a way of life in this part of the world and for many the most important link — if not the only one — with the urban centers of the state. Exploring these waterways allows a fascinating glimpse into the culture of rural south India.

Boating routes stretch all along the coast but most tourists choose to go from the coastal town of Quilon as far as Allepey, also near the coast. If your idea of fun is sitting in the hot tropical sun for eight hours then this is just the boat to take. I chose a



VILLAGERS in the Kerala region of India take advantage of a local ferry to traverse one of the many waterways that crisscross the area. PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

shorter route; a two-and-a-half-hour ride from the inland town of Kottayam also ending up in Allepey.

Waiting for the boat at the boat station feels like waiting for a long distance bus in a small town. The waterway can't be wider than a North American road, and the depot, or dock, with its benches, kiosk and schedule, looks like it is preparing for the next Greyhound to roll through. Fortunately, when the boat arrives the passengers show none of the characteristics of the typical Indian bus rider. Nobody makes a mad dash to crawl through every available window in the vehicle, rather all enter the boat in a relatively peaceful manner.

How the boat moves

through the water is a mystery. The river appears to be nothing more than a glorified marsh, filled with all sorts of engine-snarling plantlife. Amazingly the boat chugs ahead with no snags.

Immediately it becomes clear just how green — and wet — this part of India is. Coconut trees, rice paddies and a whole host of other vegetation give the area a look that more resembles Bali than South Asia. Myth has it that Kerala was created when the ancient Hindu god Parasuma threw his axe down in the Arabian Sea and the water receded up to the place it landed. It would appear that the demarcation line was not too clear. Heavy rainfall has flooded many parts of the low-

lands and huge salt water lagoons dot the coastline.

Traveling from Kottayam to Allepey gives a real taste of what the region has to offer. At the start the narrow canal passes through tiny villages where, somewhat like Venice, the inhabitants are ferried in small crafts from one side of the river to the other; across town one could say.

Interestingly, on many of the public buildings in these towns one can see a red hammer and sickle. Kerala was the first state in India to elect a communist government and even today the party runs the government, although somewhat tenuously.

Eventually the river widens and one sees huge paddies where the river is actually

higher than the fields. Pumps work steadily to try and keep the lower lands from getting flooded. Further still are lakes near the coast, many of which do not hold fresh water.

Boating not only gives a glimpse of southwest Indian geography but also allows a small taste of the eclectic religious life for which Kerala is famous. Not only temples and mosques but also churches can be seen along the journey. Christianity in Kerala traces its roots to St. Thomas who, it is said, came this way after his time as Christ's disciple. Indeed, the trip was recommended to me by a Syrian Christian who insisted his family was one of the first to be converted 2,000 years ago.

Culture and history aside, one of the most appealing features of this trip is seeing a bit of the country but not getting exhausted by it. The boat moves along at a quiet leisurely pace. Noise, pollution and crowds are not part of the package.

The trip from Kottayam to Allepey is a short one but the variations in the geography provide a good introduction to the whole experience. Days or even weeks could be spent exploring all the highways and byways of Kerala's water. The adventurous can even rent their own boat and go independently. There is something, however, kind of special about catching the 10 a.m. jetty out of Kottayam. Far from any urban discomforts, one is close to the people and in a stunningly beautiful area. Travel doesn't get much better than this.