

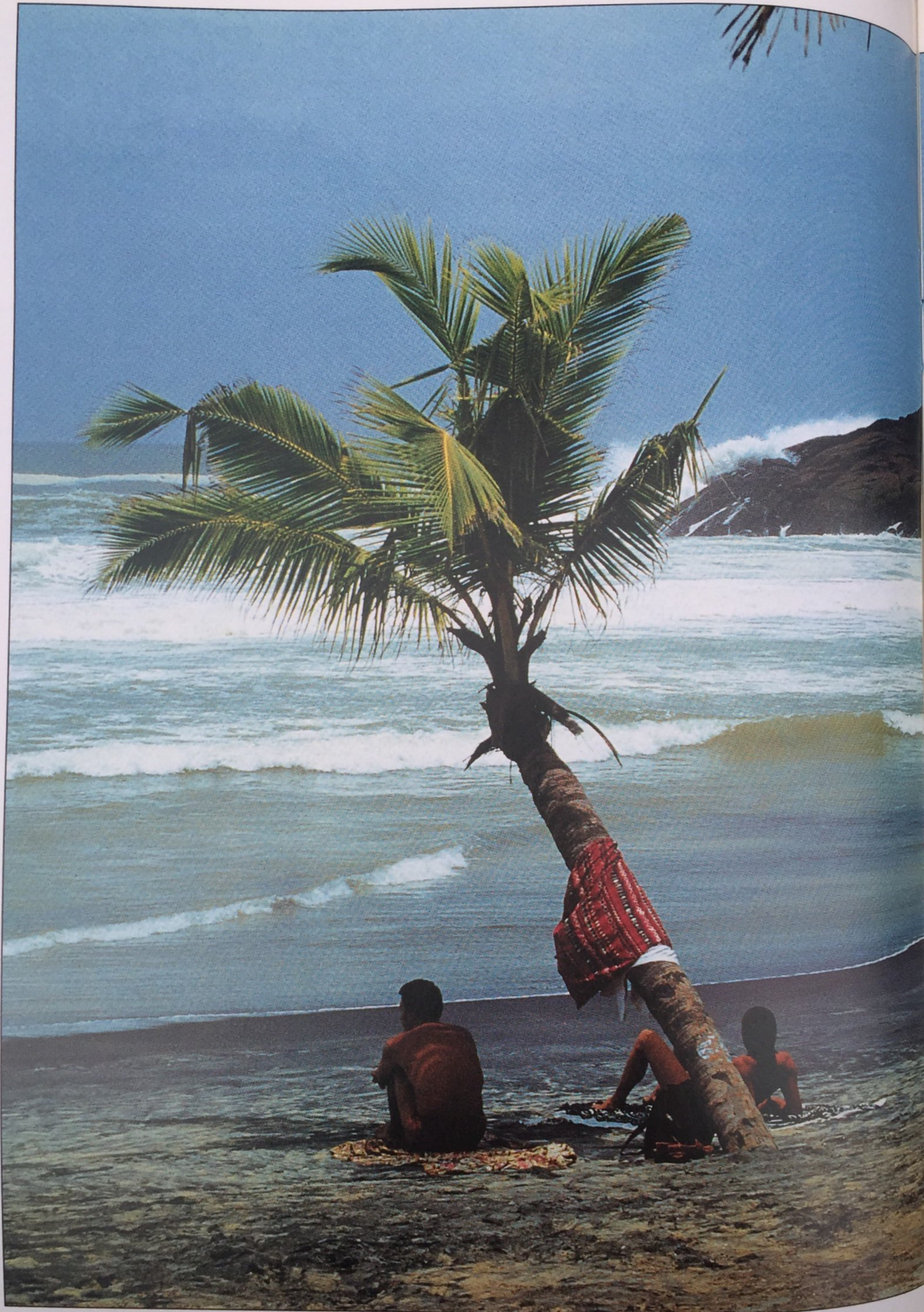
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# India

PERSPECTIVES











# Kerala

## INDIA'S EXOTIC SOUTH

SHAHID AKHTER MAKHFI

The southernmost state of India, Kerala is a long, thin, coastal strip cut off by the jagged teeth of the Western Ghats. This region is full of mindblowing landscapes capped with a benevolent climate. After all, this region is believed to have emerged from the sea when the god threw an axe into the deep waters and commanded it to retreat. Fertile paddy fields, sheaths and sheaths of water, at times flanked by laterite cliffs, stretches ahead to merge with the horizon. Red tiled homes, groves of coconut, palm swaying gently to the call of the light breeze, water hyacinths and screw pines are some of the unusual sights in Kerala. Consider no less than 40 rivers criss-crossing their way across the hill to join the palm-fringed backwaters, lagoons and on to the sea.

The best way to see Kerala is by road (it takes about 12 hours to travel across the state from tip to tip) with Backwater Cruise as and where available. A good guide is an asset and finding one is not a problem amidst Malayalis who are good humoured and lively, accounting for India's highest literacy rate.

The take off point may be Trivandrum (now called Thiruvananthapuram), the state capital which is linked by air to Cochin, Madras, Bombay, Delhi, Goa, Colombo, Male, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. The city boasts of antiquity dating back to King Solomon whose ship landed around this place. However, it was not until the 18th century when the Travancore king shifted his capital

The picturesque Kovalam beach.





here from Padmanabhapuram (now in Madras or Chennai).

Trivandrum's tourist itinerary includes city museum, which is a repository of fine works of art. Padmanabhapuram temple (housing the Anantha – the celestial serpent) is another landmark ever crowded with devotees who observe strict dress code. The Travancore kings took the title of Padmanabha Das (servant of the lord) while dedicating the kingdom to the Lord and the king remaining the mere executive of the trust.

Veli, Shankumuggan and Kovalam are few of the beaches close to Trivandrum. While Veli is often dubbed as an artificial project, Kovalam has become the relaxing getaway for foreigners travelling on a liberal budget. The beach is believed to be one of the finest in the world and besides swimming, there are opportunities for surfing, water skiing and even a catamaran ride into the sea. Another highpoint of visit to Kovalam is the famous Ayurvedic oil bath and massage facilities operating through nearly 25 such parlours. However, an independent massage boy around the beach may charge as little as Rs. 10!

From Trivandrum, tourists prefer to visit the 16th century Padmanabhapuram Palace, the seat of former rulers of Travancore which is one of the world's largest wooden palace and for sure a typical example of Kerala architecture. The guided tour to the well preserved palace reveals several things like the hidden murals, the unique flooring finished in a secret formula that imparts cooling effect, etc. Further south one should save time for India's southern most tip (though not a part of Kerala) – Kanyakumari, embracing the three seas. Besides spiritual significance, Kanyakumari offers spectacular



Top left: Cultivators at work in paddy field.  
Middle: The Chinese fishing nets.  
Left: Elephants in the Periyar wildlife sanctuary.



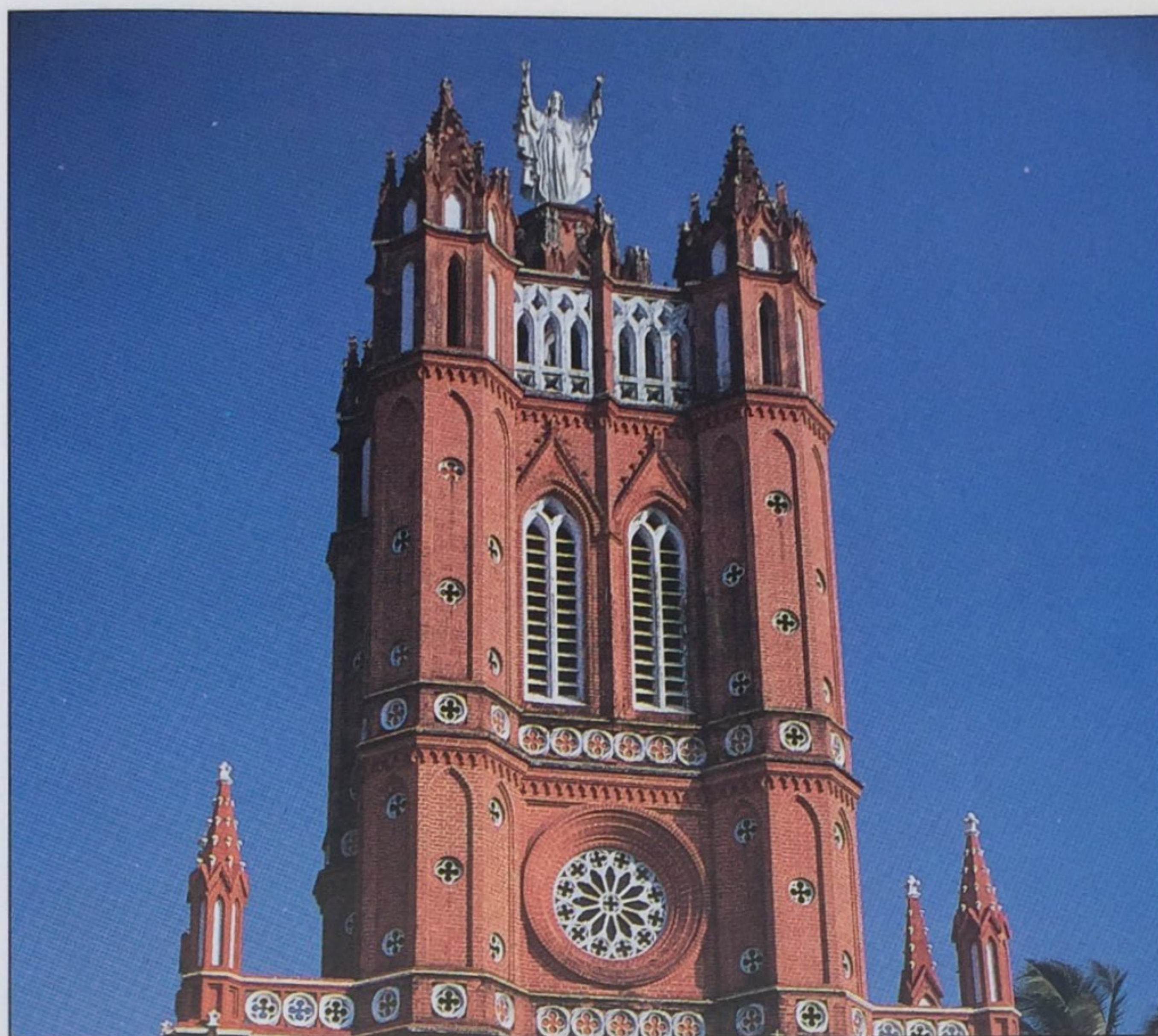
sunrise and sun set views. The unusual sight on a full-moon day is to be seen to be believed when the sun sets in the evening and simultaneously the moon shoots up from the same place! En route to Kanyakumari one should have an ear for the musical pillars of Suchnidram temple.

Reverting north by road one reaches Varkala beach, which is preferred by the budget tourists for its cheaper accommodation, compared to Kovalam. Another option is to take a bus from Kovalam to Quilon (two-hour drive) – an old port city famous for its cashew nut industry. One may consider a nine-hour cruise down the backwaters from Quilon to Allepey. The ferryboat reaches at 10 am and you spend the whole day visualizing Kerala from a closer distance. Chinese fishing nets, paddy fields, Churches, traditional Kerala houses, coir industry, coconut groves, toddy shops are some of the interesting photo frames. It is advisable to carry some packed food as there are only two brief 'tea stops'.

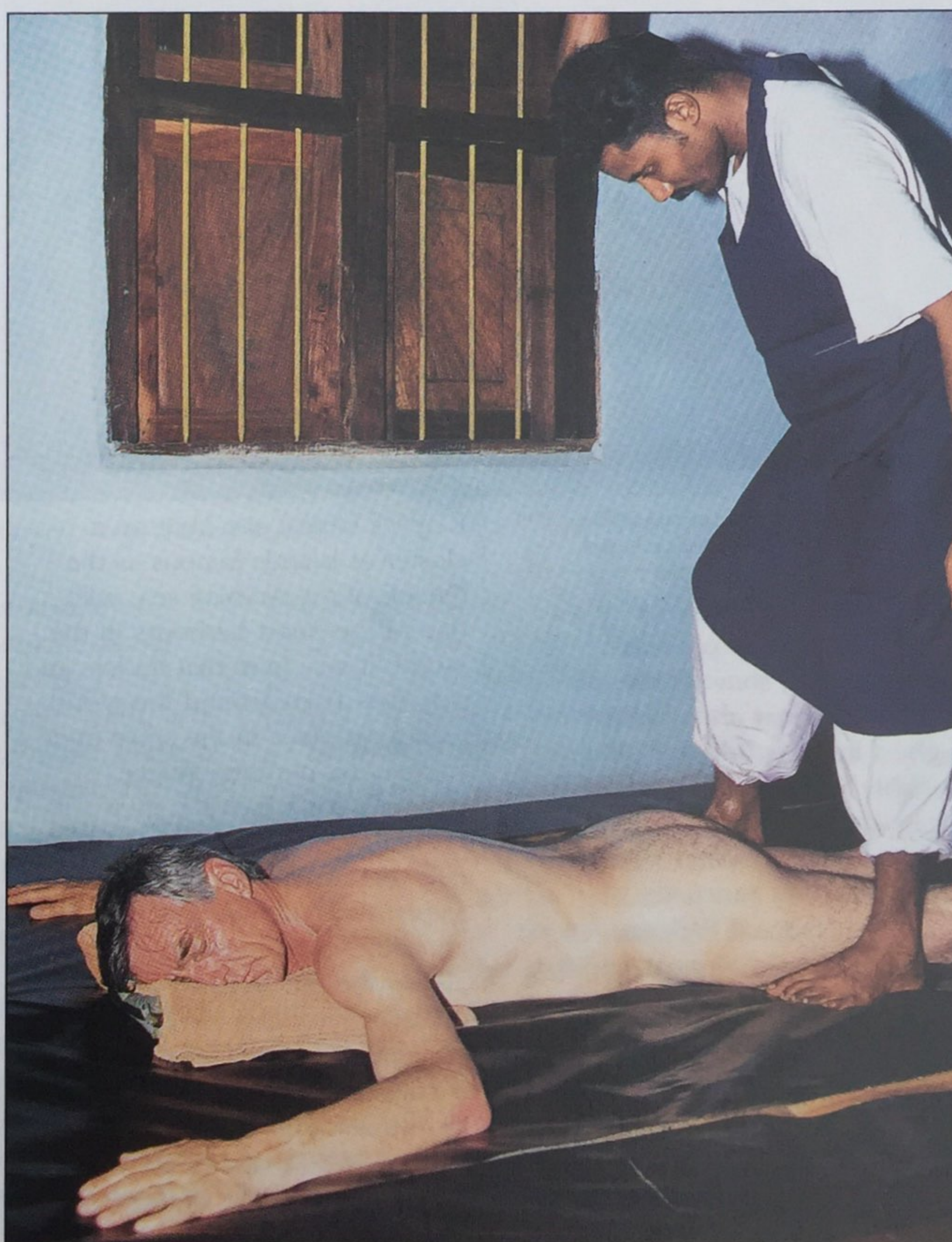
At Allepey (Venice of the East) one may consider staying at Government Guest House which is a beautiful 200-year-old British residency. Another equally pleasing government guest house of the Raj days can be seen at Kottayam – the land of lakes forming the expanse of water called Vembanad into which a network of rivers and canals merge, offering opportunities for boating, fishing or just whiling away your time on the traditional Kettuvallam, the native boat of Kerala.

Allepey is another ideal junction for considering backwater cruises. Alternatively, one can drive through the scenic hill sides and mountain swathed in rich rubber, coffee, tea, cardamom and pepper plantation to reach Munnar, an affordable paradise, perched 4900 feet above sea level,

Top right: St. Joseph's cathedral, Trivandrum.  
Right: Kerala's famous oil massage.



Shaheen Perveen



PQRS-India





Pooram festival – the caparisoned elephants dance to the tune of temple orchestra.

drenched in the fragrance of tea wafting out of the processing plants. In fact, some of the tea fields in Munnar are amongst the highest in the world at 7000 feet! Possibly your guide may help you locate the Kurinji flower that blooms once in twelve years. Chinar Wildlife Sanctuary, Rajamalai National Park are few of the attractions in Munnar which is thoroughly green in different hues. Should your interest be with wildlife, nothing better than Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary in Thekkady where the encounter with the wild is nerve shattering.

Allepey leads to Cochin (Kochi),

Kerala's largest city built on a cluster of islands famous as the Queen of the Arabian sea, with one of the finest harbours in the world. It was here that traders and travellers from around the world vied for a place in the spice trade – cardamom, nutmeg, ginger, pepper – for which Kerala is still famous. Chinese cantilever fishing nets that came from the court of Kublai Khan are an added attraction at Fort Cochin, where almost the whole town gathers in the evening to get a whiff of the cool air. During daytime the place is crowded with fish stalls ready to fry the fish in from the adjoining vendors who maintain their line of supply through the Chinese nets. Prawns are fried in coconut oil and

fish rolled in traditional Kerala masala unless you specify your own choice. Should the spice be used liberally, it may frazzle your taste buds and bring on a sweat. Nearby is the famous Vasco da Gama church and the Bishop's House. Other things of interest in the town include the synagogue and the nearby Mattancherry Palace exhibiting the architectural influences of various European powers.

Further north is Thrissur, best known for its temples and the Pooram festival held in the month of April where the decorated elephants dance to the tune of temple orchestra. Nearby is Guruvayoor, famous for its Krishna temple. En route is Kodungalloor that houses India's earliest mosque. Tourists may be disappointed to see the modern facade but the stone tablet proudly proclaims its antiquity.

The most important town in the north is Calicut (Kozhikode), center for spice trade, the old University and the Calico. The word 'Calico' for a kind of cotton fabric, now adapted into the English language, comes from Calicut. Here one should not miss the popular delicacy, Halwa, which keeps well for weeks and comes in a variety. At the extreme north is Bekal where the remains of a 15th century fort have been guarding the coastline for years and are now being developed into one of the largest resorts in South East Asia.

Thus there are endless spots in this beautiful state to bewitch and enthrall you.

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*The author is a noted freelance writer.*