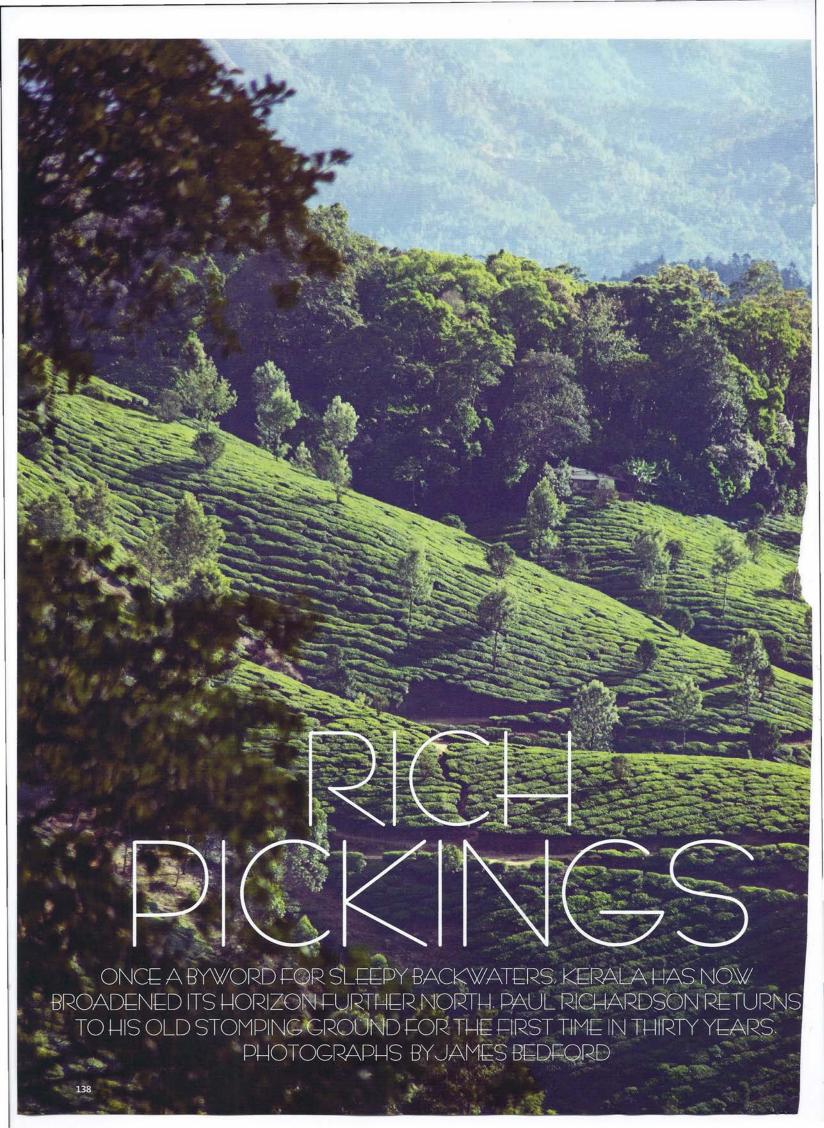


BAREFOOT BRAZIL

GREAT PLACES TO STAY ON THE BEST BEACHES



ROM THE DECK OF *The Lotus* I watched a fisherman cast his net with the graceful movements of a dancer. And I lay back to while away the half hour before dinner with a glass of watermelon juice and Ravi Shankar on the iPod as the sun set over the backwaters of northern Kerala.

I had been here once before. It was 1983, I was a callow youth just out of school, and India was what used to be called a Third World country. My diary from that gap-year trip (a stained and crumpled exercise book which, in the age of the travel blog, seems a document as rare and archaic as an illuminated manuscript) makes for amusing reading. Armed with a *Lonely Planet* guide and a tiny budget, I was reduced to staying in bug-ridden flophouses with 'bathrooms' resembling tooth cavities. As a result, the dolce vita and cultural richness of India's deep south largely passed me by.

Three decades later, India is a world economic power. Airconditioning, the internet, bottled water and some fabulous hotels have removed most of the edginess from travel here. Thirty years ago, Kerala was a backwater state in more than one sense. Nowadays, buoyed by earnings from the Persian Gulf and increasingly geared up for tourism, this is one of the better-off Indian states and one of the most accessible for Western visitors.

Arriving in Kochi on the night flight from Dubai, I crossed the Periyar bridge in the early morning, a heat haze already rising from the sprawling river. Long-buried memories began to surface: the smoke and bustle and pungent smells of the Indian morning; the atrocious roads and cheerfully dare-devil driving; and the hilarity of Indian road signs (my favourite, 'If you sleep, your family will weep'). I passed churches, Hindu temples and mosques painted mushy-pea green, and I remembered that Kerala's degree of inter-religious harmony is both extraordinary and exemplary.

Among the palm trees stood immense billboards advertising gold and jewellery, dream kitchens and computers. But some things about Kerala, and India, seemed stuck in the past: the legions of sweepers, perpetually sweeping, while the rubbish collected in drifts; women carrying firewood, fodder, laundry, water or cement on their heads with elegant nonchalance, while their menfolk sat drinking chai.

I fell into a jet-lagged slumber on the white-cotton seat covers of my chauffeur-driven Hyundai, occasionally half waking as we crossed a causeway over paddy fields where water buffalo





wallowed up to their necks. Communist flags fluttered on the lanes that wove among the coconut woods. As we drove through Kottayam, the bearded face of Karl Marx loomed up on a wall.

Kerala is a paradox of sorts, a version of India that is both typical and oddly uncharacteristic. Famously left-leaning, the state takes a justifiable pride in its near-universal literacy rates and commitment to social justice. Yet in no sense is Kerala India-lite. It has as much exoticism and energy as anywhere else in the country, and few regions have deeper roots. Kerala is the cradle of Ayurveda, the noble Hindu philosophy of wellbeing, and of antique theatre traditions such as Kathakali and Theyyam. As Patrick French writes in his illuminating *India: A Portrait*, 'the noise of central and northern India can at times drown out the subtlety of the south'.

For three hours we had been winding our way upwards into the highlands of Kerala's interior. Up at Munnar, a former colonial hill station, the climate was woolly-jumper cool. The hillsides were clad in the vibrant green of tea plantations, each tree its own flat-topped tussock, with gangs of tea pickers (quaintly known as 'pluckers') moving among them like gardeners in a maze of privet hedges. Some of these trees had been planted in the 1880s, when the British brought tea seeds from China. Above the tea was spice and forest.

My room at the Windermere Estate looked like a snapshot of an idealised 1940s England, somehow comfy and spartan at the same time, with flickering lights and framed, embroidered portraits of dogs. At 7pm prompt the manager appeared carrying a G&T on a silver tray, with a slice of lime floating on the cool, strong liquid (no ice, both for safety and authenticity).

I hadn't anticipated the chill of this mountain landscape, nor had I expected to feel nostalgia here. But at the town's tea museum I was surprisingly moved by the Raj-era portraits of slick-haired, mustachioed planters, and by a poster for the Munnar Flower Show on 18 May 1901 offering 'tiffin and gymkhana'. The manicured lawns and creaky interiors of the High Range Club were straight out of *The Far Pavilions*, and Munnar's chapel was essentially an English parish church complete with the original pews, Victorian stained-glass windows and hymn numbers on a board.

A day later, down we plunged again into the tropical zone: fields of rice and yam, papaya and pineapple. I was quickly realising

