

# KERALA BACKWATERS, INDIA

## Little Backwater About It



One of the most scenic parts of Kerala state is the "Kerala Backwaters". It's a large area of once swampy ground (think Florida Everglades) with dozens of rivers, that was transformed, over thousands of years into a series of higher lands (where people live), canals (where they travel/wash/trade), and rice paddies. It is lush, fecund, verdant, and enormously scenic. One way to see the backwaters is "in-style",



renting a rice-barge houseboat (see left) and spending the night somewhere in the backwaters. Of course, we were traveling the Intrepid way, and that means... *cheap*. So our boat was quite a bit less fancy than these craft. Two simple benches below-decks, and a host of plastic chairs on the "upper" deck. Not too exciting, just safe, economical transport - and the views were every bit as good. The only thing missing were the Gin & Tonics. The Intrepid way also means a chance to interact with locals, and unlike the vast majority of backwater visitors, we had a chance to experience

day-to-day life in the backwater, with a homestay. The homes we stayed in were very comfortable for India - concrete walls, had electricity, indoor plumbing, hot water, even cell phone coverage. Hardly "backwater". Our host, [Tomas](#), is a farmer and was also active in planning the future of their small island community. He spoke excellent English, and was passionate about his work and efforts, articulate as well.

The setting was idyllic: riverfront with kids playing, some collecting mussels for dinner in the river, dugout canoes and the occasional lux tourist boat passing by. Life revolves around the river, both for tourism and daily needs. Fishing, irrigation, a place to have a shower, [do laundry \(movie\)](#), wash the dishes, transportation, goods movement... The island we were on could be circumnavigated on foot in less than an hour. After we got settled in our respective lodgings and ate a lunch largely consisting of vegetables (and a chicken...) grown on his farm, we sat a while and talked about life on the island. Tomas gave us a tour of "his" island, introducing us to the various exotic fruits and vegetables, other crops grown around the island. Papaya, mango, breadfruit, tamarind, guava, pineapple, tapioca, manioc, bananas, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, curry, cardamom - every plant on the island seemed to be something to eat, drink, or flavor with. The villagers had seen foreign tourists before, but we were greeted with curiosity and invariably with smiles.



Where we stayed



Kids gathering mussels



Bathing & brushing teeth

Ducks are raised here, by the thousands. Every evening, at dusk, a river of ducks is herded home from where they've been feeding to their pens. It can take 10 minutes for a flock to all swim by. It's like watching a river within a river.



Tomas talked about the the role of caste in the community. Work was still centered around caste-based expertise - the palm toddy tappers



(who collect juice from palm flowers to make a mildly-alcoholic drink), the carpenters, etc. A critical caste were the wall builders - walls keeping the water in place in canals had to be rebuilt every three years or so. At rice harvest time, everyone, regardless of caste, went out to the field to help out. At dusk, the steps into the water were filled with people bathing in the canals and rivers - stocked out with soap, shampoo and towels, and fully clothed while they bathed.



A fair number of the homes were quite large and upscale. We asked who owned these. They were built by locals who went to worked as contract workers overseas, in both white collar and blue collar positions - primarily to Middle Eastern countries. It was very hard on the families - they returned home at most once a year. But, several years overseas could provide for a large home and savings that would allow the family to live comfortably for years. When we were in the relatively upscale countries of Singapore and the Maldives, we met many Indian and Sri Lankans who were in just such positions - often well educated and fluent in English. They missed home very much, but this was there way to get a start in the world.



It would have been easy to spend an entire week in this idyllic spot, but all too soon it was time to move on, and so we floated away from one of the most beautiful places in India.

