

Kerala is renowned for its black pepper and other spices, some of which are shown here. *Opposite:* On the Backwaters near Philipkutty's Farm.

Eating

**ALONG KERALA'S STORIED MALABAR
COAST, THE MIX OF RELIGIONS
AND CULTURES IS AS VARIED AS
THE FAMOUSLY PIQUANT FLAVORS.
RICHARD SCHWEID REPORTS.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON LOWE

malabar

A man with a mustache, wearing a yellow and white striped shirt and an orange dhoti, stands on a narrow wooden boat. He holds a long, thick wooden pole vertically. The boat is on a body of water. In the background, there is a traditional Malabar house with a red-tiled roof and white walls, surrounded by lush greenery and palm trees. The scene is captured in a warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

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My reason for coming to Kerala was to eat, not to die. Certainly not to die in a collision with a mammoth truck that has GIFT OF GOD written in large colorful letters above its cab. The truck, passing a bus, is in our lane and almost on top of us. My driver can't pull over to the shoulder because it's occupied by a family of four on an old motorcycle—a man with a small boy straddling the gas tank in front, his wife in an electric-lime-green sari behind him with her arms around his waist, and wedged between them an infant swaddled in white cloth. Even to avoid the imminent crunch of glass, steel, and bone, we can't plow that family off the road. At the last moment the motorcycle responds to our frantic honking and drops back, giving us just enough room to swerve around the front bumper of the oncoming truck, which never slows down or changes course.

Kerala, the long sliver of a state running down India's tropical western tip, is known for, among many things, the brightness and intricacy of the paint jobs on its truck cabs. Almost all bear a sacred name or profession of faith writ large. During my travels I saw more than one GIFT OF GOD go hurtling past, as well as scads of trucks bearing the names of saints from George to Christopher, others that proclaimed AVE MARIA or BISMILLAH, and still others dedicated to the glory of Mahavishnu or Lakshmi. Kerala's tourist board settled years ago for describing the state on its ubiquitous signposts as GOD'S OWN COUNTRY, without specifying which god.

In a sense, this mixture of religions and cultures is what lured me here in search of new tastes. Just as Kerala's Muslims, Christians, and Hindus get along amicably, all speaking the same Malayalam language, the region's cuisine is a unique amalgam of traditions. So I found on a weeklong journey from the northern Kerala town of Thalassery, or Tellicherry, as the British called it, down to the area below Kochi, still widely referred to as Cochin. It's a stretch of India historically known as the Malabar Coast, and the food here, while drawing on a variety of foreign influences, is entirely local, enlivened by the spices the region is famous for.

The results are wholly different from the piquant curries and rich tandooris of northern India that most Americans know. Kerala cuisine uses lots of coconut and lots of rice. From the



air, the coast appears to be one huge emerald-green plantation of coconut trees. And the rice, too, is homegrown. Kerala is the only place in India where part of the husk is left on the rice, giving it a distinctive red hue. And anyone who primarily thinks of Indian food as hot is in for a surprise here. Chiles are almost always present, but they're a minor note. What I found most unexpected and gratifying about Kerala's cuisine was discovering so much that I'd never tasted before—anywhere.

IT WOULD BE HARD TO HAVE A BETTER INTRODUCTION to Kerala cuisine than *biryani*, a celebratory dish that is often the meal of choice for special occasions. I was lucky enough to enjoy my first, a fish *biryani*, prepared by Faiza Moosa during my stay in one of the rooms she and her husband rent to guests. Their



Images of Kerala's diverse cultures and cuisines, which draw from numerous foreign traditions—Syrian Christian, Chinese, Jewish, Portuguese, and British



stately house crowns a colonial estate just above Tellicherry and looks out to the Arabian Sea. The area is known worldwide for its black pepper and other spices, and more than a dozen of them went into Faiza's *biryani*: coriander, green chiles, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, chile powder, turmeric, and saffron. That doesn't even include the two teaspoons of garam masala that she made by combining eight different spices.

Like many of their neighbors in this part of Kerala, the Moosas are Muslim, and they make their *biryani*s with mutton, beef, chicken, or, as in this case, fish. All the ingredients were sourced from the area, including the flavorful pearly rice and the fish, pomfret, a relative of pompano that is highly prized in the Moplah cuisine of northern Kerala. The *biryani* was garnished with locally grown cashews, raisins, and crisped onions.

After a round of refreshing lime sodas, we sat down to eat on the long veranda where I'd spent the afternoon reading, gazing out to sea, watching mongooses chase one another across the lawn and hummingbirds flit among centenarian rain trees. The fillets of pomfret, marinated in a red chile paste, were tender and piquant. No single flavor dominated the dish: Clove, coriander, chiles, a tiny explosion of fresh ginger—each would claim a moment's attention and then submerge. It was a delicious medley.

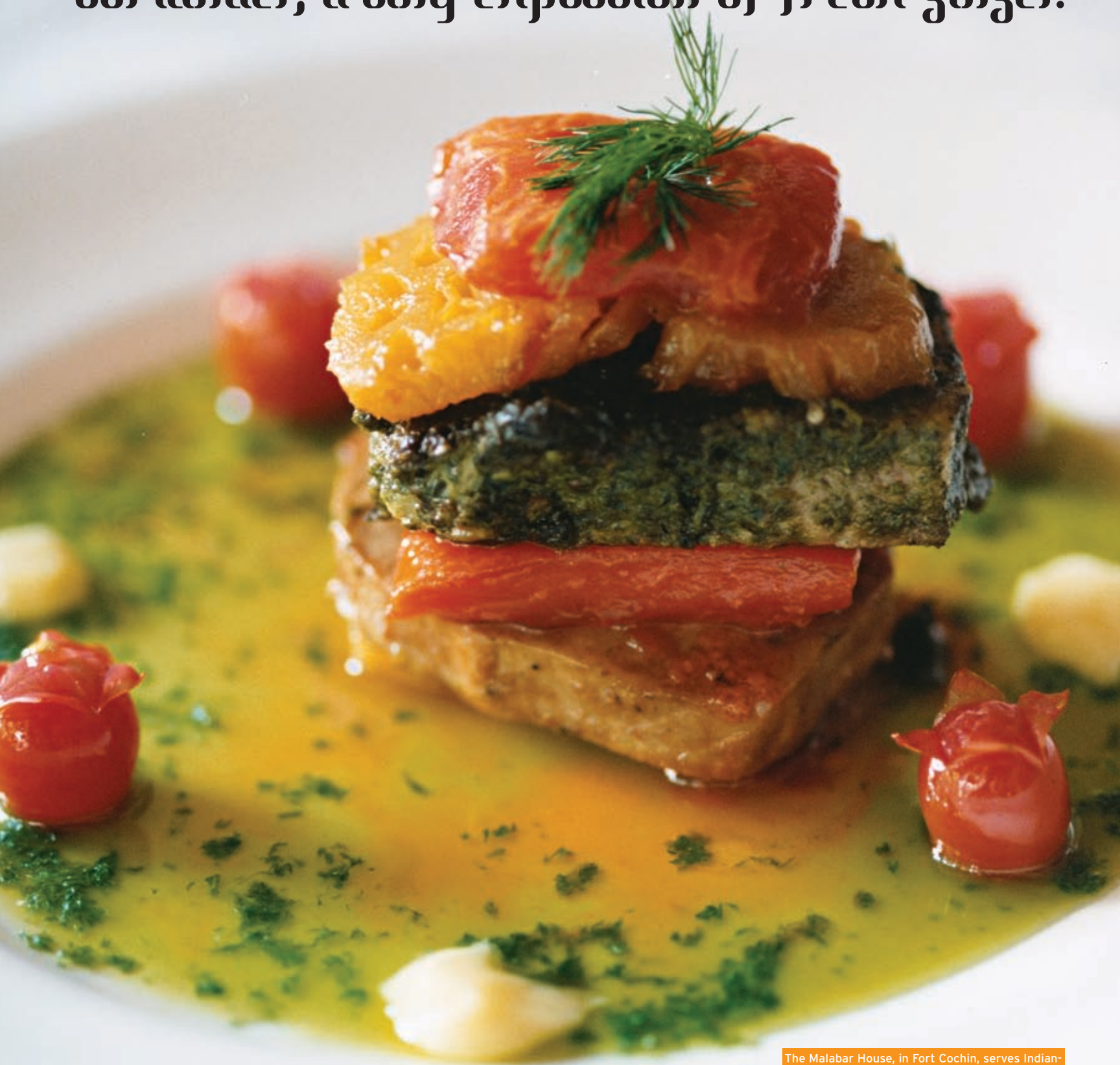
Conveniently for the food-fixated traveler, Kerala can be roughly divided into three gastronomic regions along its 360-mile length. While many ingredients are the same, preparations vary. For instance, a *biryani* in the north often comes layered with rice, but in southern Kerala the *biryani* and the rice are usually served separately. These regional differences are often explained in religious terms: The northern third of the state, with its Moplah cuisine, traces its roots back to the Islamic Arab world and follows Muslim dietary laws—no pork and only halal meat. The south has a Hindu majority with a primarily vegetarian diet, incorporating vegetables such as bitter melon, elephant yams, beetroot, and okra. Central Kerala, meanwhile, has a large population of Christians, who eat almost anything, including the area's abundant freshwater fish.

CHRISTIAN ROOTS IN KERALA ARE DEEP. SAINT THOMAS, ONE OF Jesus' 12 apostles, is said to have reached the Kerala coast in A.D. 52 and founded an Asian mission at Kodungallur, just north of present-day Cochin. In the fourth century a large group of Christians came from Syria, bringing with them a cuisine that flourishes to this day. Other tastes woven into the communal kitchen were brought by Jews who were said to have arrived a couple of decades after Saint Thomas, following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Muslims built India's first mosque in Kodungallur in 629, three years before Muhammad's death. And the Chinese developed an active trade with Kerala as early as the ninth century.

It wasn't long before Kerala attracted European colonial powers. Vasco da Gama and the Portuguese arrived in 1498, hungry for the region's black pepper and bringing with them the red chile peppers that recently had been discovered in the Americas. The Dutch followed in 1598, and the British assumed control at the end of the 18th century.

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The Malabar House, in Fort Cochin, serves Indian-Mediterranean fusion dishes such as this tuna tower with pineapple and papaya. Opposite: One of the bungalows at Philipkutty's Farm.

A common food adopted by all Keralans is coconut, which grows supremely well here. It's among the state's primary agricultural products and virtually every element of the tree and fruit is used: the oil for cooking, the meat and milk for food, the shell for utensils, the trunk for furniture, the fiber for mattress stuffing and rope, the broad palm leaves for roof thatching.

After India gained independence in 1947, Kerala's economic well-being depended on the coconut, and its importance is evident at Philipkutty's Farm in the Kottayam district south of Cochin. The property is on an island in the Backwaters, a vast network of creeks, channels, and tropical wetlands that stretches for 50 miles and includes India's longest lake, Vembanad. Anu Mathew and her mother-in-law have run Philipkutty's since Anu's husband died suddenly in 2005. They preside over five comfortable guest bungalows, set amid 35 acres planted with coconut palms, cacao, mangoes, cloves, nutmeg, figs, and vanilla. Though the women are raising two children and also oversee the farm, guests are scrupulously cared for. Among the highlights of staying here are the meals the hostesses and their family share with visitors.

On my first night Anu cooked a classic Syrian Christian fish *moily*, fillets of kingfish in a thick coconut sauce. She began by sautéing ginger, garlic, green chiles, onion, and curry leaves in coconut oil. Then she lightly fried the fish and some tomatoes with turmeric, cardamom, cloves, and finely crushed black pepper before adding coconut milk and leaving the whole thing to simmer. The light sweetness and creaminess of the coconut milk played perfectly off the tangy tomato and zesty chiles and spices. We mopped it up with *appam*, a wonderfully light rice-flour bread that often accompanies meals here. For dessert we had simple slices of fresh pineapple.

The next day, after a quick breakfast of crêpe-like *dosas* filled with vegetable-and-lentil *sambar*, Anu arranged for a houseboat to pick me up for a day cruise. Hundreds of these wooden boats—once used to haul rice and other cargo, 70 feet long with vaulted roofs of coconut thatch—navigate the Backwaters, most of them at

the service of tourists. Slowly cruising Lake Vembanad, we passed through thick clumps of water hyacinths with lavender blooms while the turquoise wings of kingfishers flashed in the trees close to shore. I was served a lime soda and shown to a spot in the shade as the onboard chef prepared a *sadya*, a traditional meal highlighting some of the jewels of Hindu vegetarian cuisine.

A *sadya* consists of several items arranged on a broad banana leaf, progressing from gravy dishes such as *sambar* to *avial*, a preparation of boiled carrots, yams, eggplant, and bitter gourd mixed with a paste of garlic, cumin, and coconut. The dishes are eaten in order, typically with *pappadam*, the crisp lentil-flour flatbread. We finished with a delightful *paal payasam*, a rice pudding made with thickened milk, rice, and sugar and topped with fresh cashews and raisins.

My last night at Philipkutty's, Anu prepared a meal of more familiar provenance: a chicken stew. Adapted from the British dish, this version is a distinctly Keralan interpretation. Spiced with cardamom, cloves, peppercorns, turmeric, and green chiles, the chicken, carrots, and potatoes were simmered in coconut milk. Anu served the stew with plenty of *appam* to soak up the juices, her family and guests sitting around the table laughing and enjoying this hearty Keralan comfort food.

WHATEVER THEIR FAITH, Keralans tend to be

conservative and family-oriented, but they are also the first voters in the world to have freely elected a Communist government, voted it out of power, and then reelected another one—something they've done twice since 1957. Despite widespread poverty Kerala has one of the highest literacy rates in India, around 90 percent, according to the United Nations. There is basic health care for all, a low infant-mortality rate, and a life expectancy that is a decade longer than the rest of India's. Kerala follows matrilineal traditions, ensuring women are valued beyond their role as child rearers. But because of Kerala's chronic economic problems, some 1.8 million of its 32 million citizens work abroad—most often in Persian Gulf cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

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Sardines, just from the sea, in a fisherman's basket

Visiting Kerala

When traveling to Kerala, spending a bit of time in Cochin, the state's cultural and commercial capital, is essential, with its colonial architecture, colorful shops, and outstanding restaurants. Wonderful side trips can be taken to beaches or inland to the Western Ghats mountains, where spices, tea, coffee, and black pepper are cultivated. Wildlife tours are available at the Periyar National Park and Tiger Reserve. Ayurvedic medicine is a big draw in Kerala, and numerous retreats—including most quality hotels—provide full Ayurvedic regimens or basic massage. Hotel prices vary substantially depending on the time of year. The rates listed here are for double rooms in high season (October–April), excluding the peak period around Christmas.

COCHIN HOTELS

BRUNTON BOATYARD This elegant and spacious property overlooking the harbor was built in 17th-century Dutch Colonial style on the former site of a boatyard. It has a pleasant pool, and all 22 luxuriously furnished rooms offer spectacular views. \$455–\$600. *Fort Cochin; 91-484/221-5461; casinogroupkerala.com*

GRANDE RESIDENCIA Recently opened, this hotel near the harbor occupies the renovated 19th-century home of one of Cochin's old Jewish families. Its 12 Heritage rooms and eight Boutique rooms are situated around a lovely courtyard, offering lots of amenities and a superattentive staff. \$250–\$415. *1/373 Princess St.; 91-484/221-8983; abadhotels.com*

MALABAR HOUSE A few minutes' walk from the waterfront in the heart of old Cochin, this comfortable place has an easy feel to it. The rooms are large and sumptuous, and the popular restaurant serves Indian-Mediterranean fusion and has a convivial bar. \$345–\$565. *1/268–1/269 Parade Rd.; 91-484/221-6666; malabarhouse.com*

COCHIN RESTAURANTS

DAL ROTI Locals and visitors alike come for the scandalously good (and inexpensive) North Indian food at this small, plain restaurant. The curries, tandooris, and *paratha* wraps—whole-wheat bread filled with vegetarian or nonvegetarian options—offer some of the best eating in Cochin. (No alcohol.) \$10. *1/293 Lilly St.; 91-484/221-7655*

FORT HOUSE This well-known harborside restaurant serves excellent food at extremely reasonable prices. Particularly recommended are the ladyfingers—okra, lightly

fried—and the seerfish in a green mango sauce that has a tart, succulent bite. (No alcohol.) \$22. *2/6A Calvathy Rd.; 91-484/221-7103; hotel forthouse.com*

HISTORY Located at the Brunton Boatyard hotel, this restaurant features an extensive menu chronicling Cochin's rich past. The excellent *chuttulli meen*, mullet marinated in onions and spices and served with coconut-flavored rice, is a traditional Jewish dish. Reservations are taken and alcohol is served. \$46. *Fort Cochin; 91-484/221-5461; casinogroupkerala.com*

OLD PORT This newcomer goes a long way toward replacing the fish huts that crowded the shore until a campaign to clean up the harborside a few years ago had them removed. The specialty here is one from northern India—fish tandoori. The customer chooses his own fish, which is then cleaned and cooked in a tandoor oven with ginger and garlic, mild or hot as requested. (No alcohol.) \$16. *River Rd.; 91-484/221-5341*

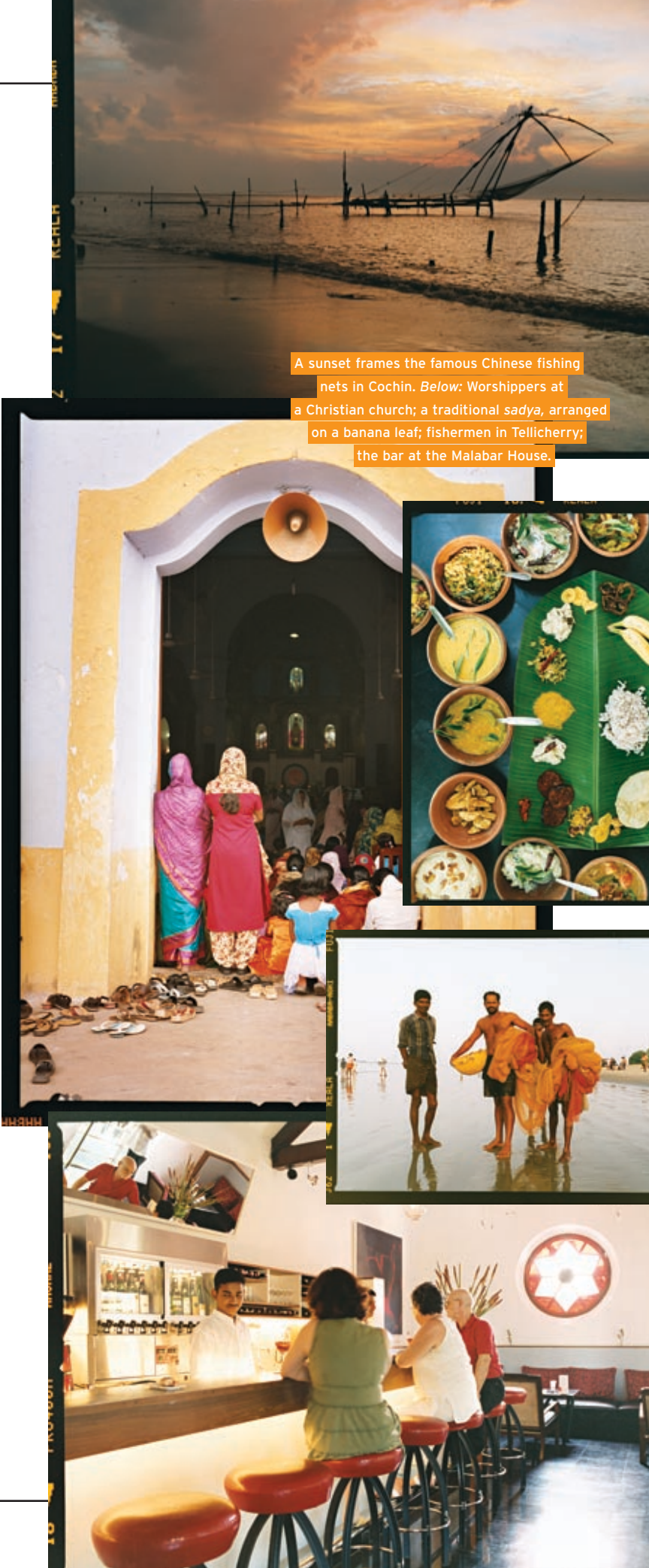
BEYOND COCHIN

AYISHA MANZIL Faiza and C. P. Moosa have turned their home on a colonial estate in Tellicherry into a guesthouse with six cool, high-ceilinged rooms. There's no TV, but the beach is nearby and various excursions are available, such as attending a *teyyam* dance performance. Faiza also conducts cooking lessons. \$275, meals included. *Court Rd.; 91-490/234-1590*

MARARI BEACH Some 40 miles south of Cochin, on a pristine stretch of sand, this resort has 52 thatched-roof, air-conditioned bungalows, some with private pools. Meals at the spectacular restaurant, which serves local and European cuisine, are included. \$345–\$690. *Mararikulam, Alappuzha; 91-484/301-1711; cghearth.com*

PHILIPKUTTY'S FARM The five bungalows—which can accommodate up to either three or six guests—are on an island in the Backwaters, near the popular tourist destination of Kumarakom. Breezes keep the rooms comfortable and there's always something to watch passing on the lake. TV, telephone, and Internet are available at the family's adjacent home. Houseboat trips can be arranged. \$280, meals included. *Vechoor, Kottayam district; 91-482/927-6529; philipkuttyfarm.com*

SPICE VILLAGE Created by the ecoconscious CGH Earth group, this resort of 50-odd bungalows is just outside Periyar National Park. There is an excellent restaurant, a beautiful British-era bar, and a staff that will organize tours of the park or a nearby spice plantation, trips to ride and bathe elephants, or an Ayurvedic massage. \$300–\$465. *Thekkady-Kumily Rd., Thekkady; 91-484/301-1711; cghearth.com*



A sunset frames the famous Chinese fishing nets in Cochin. Below: Worshippers at a Christian church; a traditional *sadya*, arranged on a banana leaf; fishermen in Tellicherry; the bar at the Malabar House.

EATING MALABAR

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Though Kerala's administrative capital is Thiruvananthapuram (unpronounceable to non-Malayalam speakers, who call it Trivandrum), the state's cultural and business center is Cochin, some 130 miles up the coast. It's a fascinatingly diverse city, where a church, a mosque, and a Hindu shrine can often be found on the same block. And the food is equally varied.

For breakfast there are *iddiappam*, or string hoppers. These thin strands of rice-flour dough, which resemble odd noodles, are gathered into a nest and served with coconut milk and sugar. They are typically accompanied by fresh juice—watermelon or mango—and tea. Between meals there are all kinds of tempting sweets. I fell for the banana chips glazed with jaggery, a coarse, unrefined sugar often made from palm sap, and for *halwa*, a gelatinous confection (rice powder mixed with jaggery, coconut milk, and fruit) that comes in many flavors.

Many of Kerala's restaurants don't serve alcohol, but one can find a coconut toddy, often consumed as a sleep aid. It looks like watery milk but is actually the fermented sap of the coconut flower. Imbibed in excess, it leaves a vicious hangover.

A person could do nothing more than eat new foods in Kerala for a lot longer than a week, I thought, sitting on the Fort House terrace and watching fishermen throw and retrieve their nets as their small boats tossed in the wake of passing tankers. In Kerala there are something like 20 kinds of bananas and more than 40 varieties of chiles, of which I tried only a few. My meal at Fort House—one of the best I've ever eaten—included a perfectly sweet preparation of kingfish with green mango and coconut milk and a dish of crisp-fried okra, or ladyfingers, as they are called here.

There's a tradition around religious holidays and feast days in Kerala called *pakarcha*, which means "sharing." It involves taking food to someone of a different faith so that neighbors and friends share their special dishes on important days. A dish made for a Hindu holiday is brought to a Muslim friend; a dish from a Christmas table is brought to a Hindu neighbor. After a leisurely passage through Kerala, eating all the way, I had the sensation I'd experienced a kind of *pakarcha*, that Keralans had presented me with the rich flavors of this multifarious coast. ■