Kerala Houseboats â€“ Moving palaces in tropical paradise

by Mahi Manral

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Kerala is a tropical paradise with palpable beauty. You can do nothing much than marvel at it. Kerala is situated in the Malabar Coast of southwestern India. This verdant piece of land is cradled between Western Ghats and Arabian Sea.

Pristine beaches mist shrouded hill stations, placid backwaters, exotic wildlife, verdant landscape and sophisticated art forms form the prominent attractions of Kerala tour packages. Out of these, Backwaters is the singular attraction that makes Kerala unique. Nowhere else in the world can one find a similar phenomenon. Backwater is a complex network formed by canals and inlets which are manmade and natural, estuaries of over forty rivers and five lakes. Before the advent of boats, roads and bridges backwaters were the means of transportation for local folk. They also depended on it for means of livelihood like fishing and agriculture. Backwater is continuing to play that economic role to perfection by earning millions by ways of tourism.

Backwaters make for exquisite setting with shores abounds with greenery and interesting activities of life; and backwaters is embellished by water flowers especially water lilies. Millions throng to Kerala allured by the reputation of backwaters to have a cruise savoring this landscape.

Houseboats are now the superstars of backwater tourism. Kerala houseboat tours are a hot item in global tourism map. Houseboats are modernday luxurious specially designed boats for human dwelling modeled on â€œKettuvallamsâ€• of yesteryears. They are large floating formations with high load carrying capacity. They were used to carry rice and other household items from interior villages to merchant towns. They came with thatched roofs over wooden hulls to offer protection from elements of nature. Although the form remains largely unaltered, houseboats Kerala are two to three storied affairs with one to five bedrooms. Apart from sleeping space there is provision for dining space and a sit out open on all sides. From the sit out guests can relish the elegant charm of backwaters. Houseboats are adjoined with generators providing for air conditioning. A crew including a cook accompanies guests. The menu provided is usually indigenous variety with local fish included. Although houseboats are motorized they are run at a sluggish pace letting guests drink the exquisite beauty of backwaters to the brim.

Although backwater is an all Kerala phenomenon, the main centers of backwater tourism for now are Alleppey, Kochi, Kollam and Kumarakom. Kumarakom is a small idyllic village endowed with all the bounties of a backwater village. It also homes a bird sanctuary which is frequented by migratory birds especially Siberian Crane. You can also have houseboat cruises in Kumarakom. Kumarakom houseboats can be classified into Budget, Deluxe, Premium and Five Star categories.

Houseboats are constructed with the traditional Kerala houseboat carpentry principles and techniques of boat building by the local carpenters. The wood used is that of Anjili (Wild Jack). It is to be noted that no nails are used. Coir is used to fasten the wood. The roof is made up of bamboo poles and the thatching is done by palm leaves. To prevent the wood from deteriorating cashew nut oil is painted as varnish over the exterior of the boat. Houseboats come of varying sizes. The length is usually from ninety five feet to one hundred and fifteen feet and width from thirteen feet to fifteen feet.

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