



# The Frenzied Sea

Though the sea in Kovalam is not in its best mood during monsoon, it still soothes your nerves. And of course, ayurveda and seafood play their parts to perfection. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**

**D**RIVING TO THE airport I saw dark clouds looming and prayed it wouldn't rain. It didn't till I got on the plane, but there was no escaping the monsoon. A massive downpour played spoilsport and delayed my flight to Thiruvananthapuram by more than three hours. 'This is not how my first trip to south India should start', I thought. After all, I only had one precious weekend to spend in Kovalam. I fervently hoped the rain would not follow me there, and as the plane descended I peered out of the window and smiled—my prayers were answered. Getting a bird's eye view of Kerala's spectacular coastline, I noticed the soil had an orange tinge, providing a distinct contrast to the green cover of trees.

Once out of the airport, all I could see around me were tall coconut and palm trees swaying in the breeze, and signboards in Malayalam, reconfirming my mental picture of Kerala. On way to The Leela Kempinski, Kovalam Beach, the driver asked me what 'Kerala music' I wanted to hear. I had no clue, and left it for him to decide. What I heard for the next 15 minutes was traditional, instrumental music—quite different from the Bollywood numbers that blare in cabs up north. As we entered the gate he informed me the resort was built on a cliff top. With the sea on my left, an exclusive beach, and a sprawling 44-acre property before me to explore, I knew this was going to be good.

Tucked amidst trees, the resort with red-tiled Kerala style roof seemed to merge perfectly into its setting. The car halted before the main lobby entrance, and women dressed in traditional white Kerala saris welcomed me with



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP *The Padmanabhaswamy temple; The Living Room at The Club; Divya spa lobby; The Leela resort sitting pretty on the cliff*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE LEELA, KOVALAM





a sea-shell garland, tilak and some refreshing coconut water. The lobby of The Club, an exclusive 'Sea View' wing of the hotel, was inviting, but tired after the journey I headed straight to my room.

**M**y private butler Pankaj escorted me to the room. I got cheap thrills after he told me that guests staying in the other wings of the hotel—namely the Beach View and Pavilion—are not allowed to use any of the facilities of The Club. It had a gym, international spa, an exclusive restaurant—The Café, next to the ocean rim infinity pool. Fresh rose petals, floating in bowls on marble pedestals at different corners of the wing, suitably added to the rosy picture that Pankaj had conjured up.

A typical Kerala style room with a high wooden ceiling welcomed me. From its private balcony, separated from the room by wooden screens, I watched the white froth of the sea waves crashing against rugged rocks. The grey sea was in a frenzied mood, a sight I will not forget for many years.

### HOT DEAL

#### DIWALI OFFER

**Rs. 10,500 a night for a Beach View Deluxe room. Includes buffet breakfast, use of the gym and swimming pool. Valid from October 16 to 31.**

*The Terrace Restaurant along the infinity pool  
FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE The Club Suite;  
The plush lobby with a typical Kerala roof*

Even from the bathroom, I could look right out to the sea, making me feel as if its vastness was a part of my life.

A bit tired, I dipped my feet into the dimly lit infinity pool next to the multi-cuisine restaurant The Terrace, and washed my stress away. The blue colour was really soothing—I had forgotten how relaxing it is to just sit by the pool and be at peace with yourself. But Kerala's monsoon soon caught up with me, disturbing this extremely private moment, and sadly I was forced to dash out of the pool area.

What is a trip to Kerala without getting a flavour of its culture, and what better way to do it than to watch a kathakali and kalaripayattu performance. I did all this while sipping mojito and nibbling pepper fry prawns, which made the experience special. The martial arts started slowly but with each performance, the tempo became

### F.Y.I

#### MUSICAL PLEASURE

*There are four musical pillars in the Padmanabhaswamy temple—dedicated to Lord Vishnu—where music can be heard if they are tapped from the other side. Don't forget to visit it. Press your ear against one pillar and ask someone to tap from the other side. If you listen carefully you will be able to hear faint instrumental music in the background.*



more vigorous, till it seemed that the men were ready to kill each other as they clashed using knives and swords.

Browsing through the umpteen number of dishes on the menu, I chose *chemmeen* curry first and luckily seemed to have hit upon the right dish. It was the most heavenly prawn curry I had ever tasted—mildly flavoured with coconut and Kerala spices. Just when I was satiated and ready to retire a group of merry revellers pulled me into a frenzied dancing spree. It actually turned out to be pretty relaxing and gave me a fresh appetite. I headed straight for desserts, and ignoring my all-time favourite moist chocolate cake, I tried *ada pradhama*, a warm dish made with rice, jaggery and coconut milk. Feeling bloated, I decided to walk till my room instead of going by car.

A pillow menu with a choice of 12 options awaited me on the bed. Going through the list—'Horse Hair Pillow' for kids and a fire-resistant 'Smokers Pillow'—I was tempted to order one, but left it for another night. Sinking into the soft mattress and covering myself with the goose down feather duvet, all I could hear was the crashing waves.

**N**ext day was my tryst with the famed Kerala ayurveda. Divya, the ayurvedic spa of the hotel had warm wooden interiors and fragrance of lemongrass floating in the air. A treatment had been chosen for me—a combination of *shirodhara* with *abhyanga snana*. My therapist welcomed me into the softly-lit room, and for the next 90 minutes, with soothing music playing in the background, massaged my body with hot medicated herbal oils. I couldn't help worrying about how I'll get rid of all the oil dripping into my hair! My fears came true as it refused to come off even after three shampoos. But the entire process left me refreshed, rejuvenated and hungry.

Reluctantly I decided I had luxuriated enough and must explore some of the city. On my way to the Napier Museum and the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, the hotel guide told me that girls wearing western clothes and foreigners are not allowed in the temple. So before entering, a white muslin cloth was tied around my waist.

For dinner that night I tasted *karimeen*, a fish only found in the backwaters of Kerala. Wrapped in banana leaves, it was cooked to perfection with delicate flavours

of coconut, lemon and spices.

The next day as I packed, I felt something was amiss. I checked the luggage and everything was in place. Suddenly it hit me; I hadn't had a moment to spend at the resort's exclusive beach. I rushed down with barely 20 minutes before leaving for the airport. Almost running, I reached the beach where foreigners swam. Taking off my floaters, I strolled down the coast as the cool waves of the Arabian Sea washed my feet. As I walked away, I turned back for a last glance and promised myself to return sometime, maybe with someone special. ●

## FACTFILE

### GETTING THERE

*Fly on Jet Airways from Delhi via Mumbai to Thiruvananthapuram. Fare: Rs. 30,000 (approx)*

### WHEN TO GO

*The best time to visit Kovalam is between November and February. The weather is pleasant. But the monsoon season is the best time for ayurvedic treatments.*

## PLUS SAYS

### STAY

*The Leela Kempinski, Kovalam beach. Tel: (0471) 248 0101; www.theleela.com*

### EAT

*Choose from multiple cuisines at any of the restaurants at The Leela. 'Tides', their sea beach restaurant serves fresh seafood.*

### SHOP

*Banana chips that are available in different flavours—spicy, masala and others. Handicrafts made from seashells sold at the beaches are popular too.*

### SEE

*Visit the Light House beach in Kovalam and Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram.*