

Boatmen pole their long canoe-like vessel on one of the many canals near Kollam in the green, green state of Kerala.

I spent most of my first three weeks in Kerala covered from head to toe in warm, sticky, earthy-smelling oil. Every day three female technicians dressed in cotton saris and aprons at the Somatheeram Ayurvedic Beach Resort would drizzle it slowly over me while I lay on a hand-carved treatment bench. Sometimes they would apply the thick orange-brown unguent over my entire body, while I struggled to remain still and not slip around. Other times, they'd keep the warm oil flowing continuously over my scalp, like a river, for

Explore landscapes of body and soul at India's most important locale for ayurveda, the subcontinent's science of natural medicine.

45 minutes. This treatment is called *sirodhara*, and it's supposed to calm the nerves. I think it worked, but I'm not really sure since after about five minutes of it I usually feel asleep.

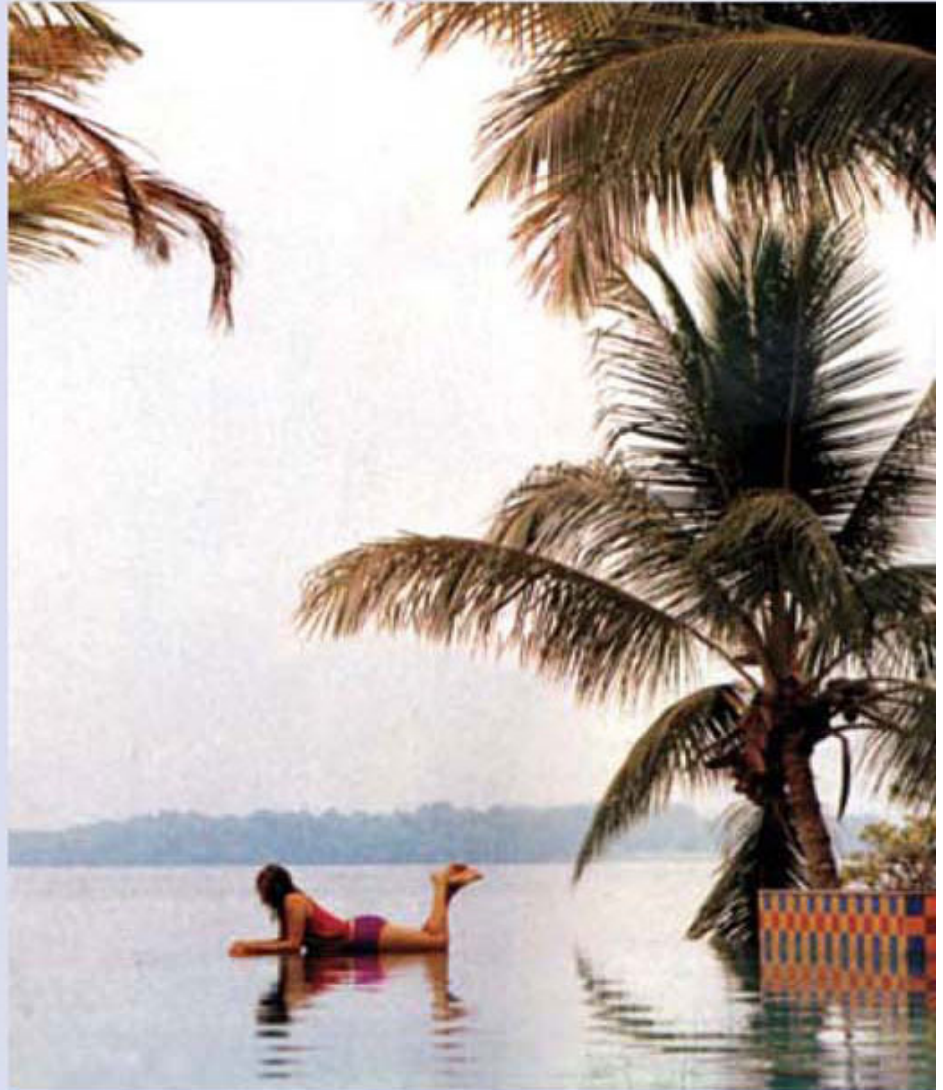
Kerala, one of the smallest Indian states, is a sliver of tropical green tucked between the blue Arabian Sea and the abruptly rising mountain chain called the Western Ghats. Historically fascinating, it is said that the Apostle Thomas brought Christianity here, and the city of Cochin boasts a Jewish synagogue that was founded some 400 years ago. Not surprisingly,

the area is culturally rich (there are hundreds of Hindu temples, each with its own festival and some boasting their own resident Kathakali dance troupes). Kerala is justly one of the biggest destination draws of India.

Yet, on my first trip there, I hardly strayed from my little stone cottage on a cliff that overlooked a wide beach and a thundering sea. I had come to Kerala not to frolic or sightsee, but to detox the ayurveda way. Ayurveda, 5,000 years old, some say, seeks to balance the body into health through diet, a natural way of living, and medicinal herbs, which, in ayurveda, are both ingested (mostly via delicious Keralan cuisine, ingredients chosen by the doctors according your health condition) and infused into thick oils that are then massaged into the body for days & weeks on end.

Ayurveda has become so popular with travelers from Switzerland and Germany that Kovalam, the strip of coastline just south of the city of Trivandrum, has turned into a South Asian *Magic Mountain*, dotted with little resorts like **Somatheeram**, where oil-sticky guests tiptoe quietly to their treatments between naps.

I have no photographs of my first visit to Kerala, for a few years ago, I was a



Travelers come to Kerala to unwind and detox at one of the many spas dedicated to ancient ayurveda.

Kerala, for after a few exhausting days of complete rest, torpor overcame me, and just getting from my cottage to the restaurant became my major activity. With every passing day, the idea of leaving the compound to visit the mountains or to glide in a wooden boat through the picturesque backwater canals that crisscross Kerala's interior seemed more and more remote.

But I didn't need to explore Kerala, for it had come to me. Its herbs were on my palate, its plants

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