

Idyllic: The retreat sits on a cliff surrounded by palm trees.

An inside journey to INDIA

India is home to some incredible wonders. There is the Taj Mahal, a grand symbol of love. And of course, the sacred waters of the Ganges, where millions make a holy pilgrimage each year.

There is also another place that deserves a mention and it is in the south-west corner of this vast country. What struck me most when I was there was the sound of waves crashing as the Arabian Sea made its music, outside my window. Then there were the birds, it seemed like thousands, chanting their morning songs. Waking up in my netted bed, I had to think twice about where I was.

Surely, this could not be India. Where was the noise of the streets that gives India its hum and heartbeat; the bustle and madness of all the millions of people?

But glancing from my cottage veranda, instead of taxis and tuktuks, I saw tall, thick palm trees and a small congregation of locals in silent prayer at a stone church.

In what seemed a major contradiction, India appeared to me, a first-time traveller, a very quiet place.

The south-western most part of India, in the state of Kerala, is often dubbed "God's own country". Kerala is India's green heartland and the State is lush and tropical and one of India's most affluent and literate areas.



Bounty: Fishermen bring in their boats after a night on the Arabian Sea.

Kerala is also the birthplace of Ayurveda — the study of prolonging life and is a traditional healing system that dates back many thousands of years. Ayurveda has gained publicity in the West, through international author and health guru Dr Deepak Chopra, who is a strong believer in its benefits.

The Ayurvedic Rejuvenation Retreat that I visited is a magical place. It is an oasis of 7ha of pristine land sitting high on a cliff overlooking the Arabian Sea. As soon as you enter the gates you are enveloped in a green, manicured sanctuary.

Regular retreat visitor and director of specialist travel agency Journeys of the Spirit, Julie Baker says: "People get scared off by India because of the intensity of people and the poverty. But there is just so much more. And the beautiful region of Kerala is very soft on the senses."

This part of India offers a variety of Ayurvedic health retreats. But after many years of research Ms Baker has sourced the best for its authenticity, quality of treatments, food and standard of accommodation.

She began Journeys of the Spirit to cater for travellers who wanted to experience the world on a deeper, more personal level. Ms Baker designs itineraries that create a balance of exploration and indulgence and are tailored to individuals. She says her aim is to let people experience the culture and custom of a country but also allow themselves a little luxury.

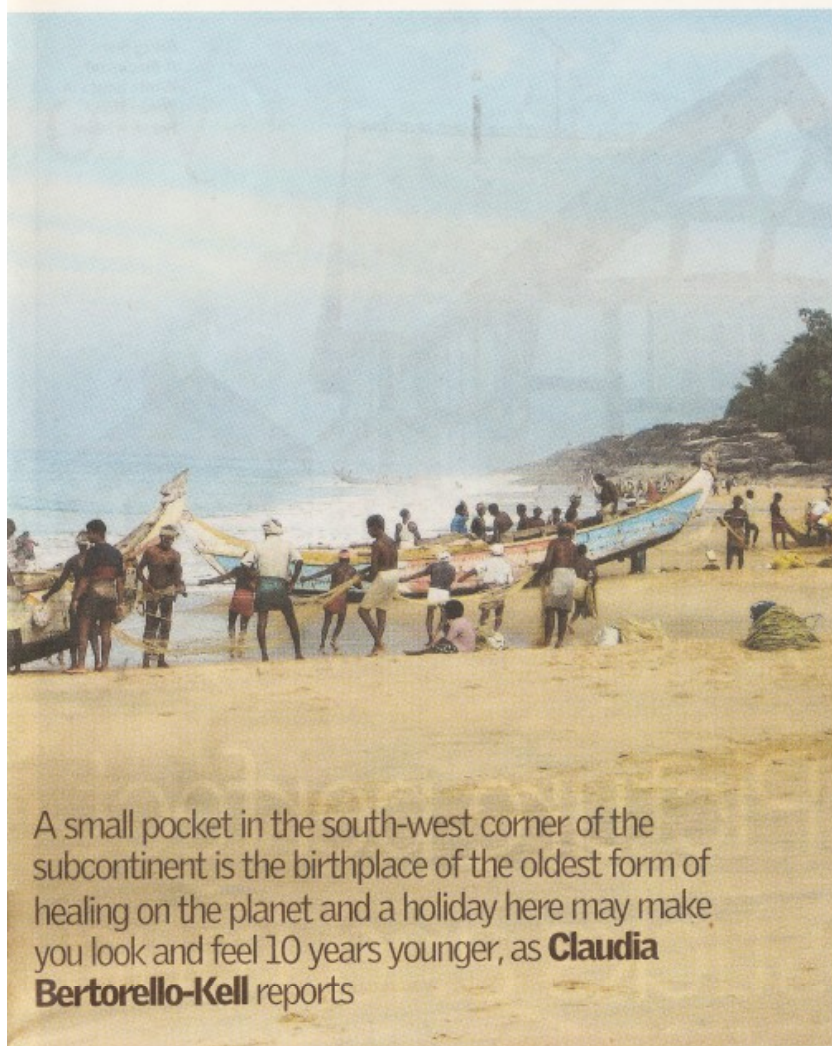
Having visited the region many times, she has discovered the local secrets and the little out-of-the-way places a first-timer would never find. She also knows the best way to get the most out of a retreat stay.

She regularly escorts groups of Australian visitors to India for rejuvenation retreats and also helps create the dream for individuals seeking some much-needed time out.

Perth woman Shirley Snow described the experience as life-changing.

"I feel fitter and healthier and my life will never be the same again," Ms Snow said.

Pharmacist Peter Krasenstein was astounded at how quickly his



A small pocket in the south-west corner of the subcontinent is the birthplace of the oldest form of healing on the planet and a holiday here may make you look and feel 10 years younger, as **Claudia Bertorello-Kell** reports



Beauty: Floral displays adorn the retreat.

fact file

> GETTING THERE:

Singapore Airlines flies 19 times a week to Singapore and Silk Air to Trivandrum three times a week. Perth passengers will depart from the new state-of-the-art Terminal 3 at Changi Airport.

> GUIDED TOUR:

Julie Baker is an experienced travel agent and director of Journeys of the Spirit. Ms Baker is an expert on Indian Ayurvedic retreats and takes groups to India several times a year. She also facilitates private journeys for individuals. Phone 0427 766 716 or go to www.journeysofthespirit.com.au. The next group departures to Kerala are in October and March.

> BEST TIMES TO VISIT:

Ms Baker suggests visiting Kerala from December to April or September and October. Kerala experiences its monsoon season from May to August, however, this is still considered a good time for Ayurvedic treatments.

blood pressure dropped. In just three days it was back to within normal limits.

An individual rejuvenation treatment program begins with a detailed consultation with an Ayurvedic doctor. Physicians at the retreat must study for at least nine years before they can begin practising. They say they have a deep understanding of how to help bring you back into balance, mentally, physically and emotionally.

Retreat programs are individually designed for a stated outcome, whether it be a health issue, to balance body weight, de-stress or simply slow down and rejuvenate. Massage treatments, activity programs and a menu are then created for you by Ayurvedic doctors.

As a doctor at the retreat says: "Working here, our aim is for relaxation. Most people are coming from very stressful conditions and we aim to balance and rejuvenate the individual."

Part of a rejuvenation program includes daily massages. Two therapists work in unison on your body, using their hands and feet massaging warm herbal oil, specifically prepared for your body type, into your body for more than two hours.

One treatment, Sirodhara, involves warm oil or medicated milk flowing from an urn placed above the forehead to your acupressure points for about 40 minutes. This treatment is for insomnia, memory, headaches and mental tension.

Ms Baker took us to the plant where local people make herbal oils and treatment creams by



Care: Therapists at the retreat wait to give a massage.

hand. This tender care and attention are crucial to the Ayurvedic philosophy.

At the retreat, delicious Indian cuisine plays a major part in the Ayurvedic treatment program. The food is authentic for the southern region and is organically grown on the property or surrounding areas. Menus are designed according to your program and freshly prepared. The cuisine lived up to all my expectations.

Yoga is offered for all levels and the 78-year-old teacher can still manoeuvre himself like a young man. For those wanting complete relaxation, a hammock or day bed awaits. Or maybe a daily walk. That in itself is an experience.

Taking a walk along the beach every morning gives a true taste of this region of India. Small villages dot the way and offer an insight into the local culture.

My retreat was a wonderful first taste of the mysteries of India but also offered an incredible personal journey, inside my body and mind. I'm already planning the next part of my journey.



Delight: A local girl.

Pictures: Julie Baker and Claudia Bertorello-Kell

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