



Colourful Door

KERALA'S CHANTING FISHERMAN

Gone Fishing! Mike Smith and his family visited Kerala, “God’s own Country” in “Incredible India” and spent hours watching fishermen, using centuries old techniques, eke out a living hauling in their nets.



Fish Market

As a boy I enjoyed fishing with a small net for minnows and sticklebacks which I took home in jam jars and kept as pets. I no longer fish, but do like exploring fishing communities. Those in Kerala, India are some of the most interesting I've ever been to.

Going to India can be a bit daunting so we relied on IK Chin Travel to arrange a customised package which worked out extremely well for us. Clearing immigration at Trivandrum (or Thiruvananthapuram as it is officially known) at 10:00pm the 25km drive to our hotel was very strange and slightly creepy. No traffic, not many people, very few lights, just extremely narrow deserted lanes with regular potholes to keep us awake. Nothing like the bustling India I was familiar with.

Hauling in the Nets

After a good night's sleep and an early breakfast it was time to discover our neighbourhood. A short walk down a quiet street led to Chowara Beach where groups of men were hauling in ropes attached to fishing nets that extended far out to sea. In a well-choreographed routine the back marker controlled the labourers. He led the ritual chanting of encouragement and coiled the rope as the heavy net was slowly pulled in. Team work at its best with each man knowing his role!

Those at the back trundled to the front of the line to keep dragging the net in. It gradually became obvious that two lines of men, initially a hundred metres apart, were not independent but actually working in tandem pulling either end of a huge net to shore and moving closer together to form a circle, trapping their prey in the net.

Finally, with the bulk of the net getting close to shore much more effort and louder chanting was needed. Suddenly, with much shouting and laughter a small group of men ran splashing into the sea to scare the fish into the nets.

The Catch is Displayed

The "full" net was eventually heaved onto the beach and the careful process of examining the net began. Women, who had been observing from a distance, were



encouraged to approach the scene with their aluminium bowls. Crows cawed like crazy and egrets waited for scraps of fish that might be discarded.

After carefully flicking the fish to the centre of the net, what looked like an incredibly small catch for such a massive effort was openly displayed. The auction began: the women were the buyers and haggled fiercely. It didn't seem like a win-win situation which surprised me as the same scene must play out every day!

A deal was eventually done. A small sum of money was handed over, which would later be shared out amongst the crew and the fish scooped into a bowl for distribution to retail sellers at the market. Other women waited patiently for the next net to be hauled in. The net was folded and put to one side for cleaning, the women continued with their gossip and we walked along the beach to see what more it had to offer.

A Seafood Dinner

There were hundreds of birds all over the beach scavenging, primarily crows and egrets (Kerala's equivalent of Britain's seagulls!) but we were thrilled to find a black kite which posed nicely before flying off with a rotten fish carcass. The men's work wasn't finished as a group proceeded to pull a boat ashore. Being a fisherman in Kerala is not an easy life and the pay is poor! Spotting a small market at the edge of the beach we headed for it. It didn't seem the most hygienic place to buy one's fish, but nobody cared and bought their share.

I returned to the beach after lunch and it was interesting to watch the fishermen patiently mending and drying their nets.

Tomorrow their ritual would start again. Thanks to their hard labour fish would be on our menu tonight, but not at Chowara. It is too dull and isolated when the fishermen are not around and there isn't anywhere to get a drink!

Most tourists to Trivandrum stay near Kovalam, which is much busier than Chowara and has a greater selection of hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops and that's where we had dinner. The German Bakery at Lighthouse Beach in Kovalam was highly recommended by our guide and it was an excellent choice. The view from the upstairs terrace over the beach and fishing boats with their lights shining at sea is fantastic and the seer fish, calamari, saag paneer and iced cold beer were delicious. We paused and reflected, it was hard to believe we hadn't been in India for 24 hours yet! What an amazing fun packed day watching fishermen at work.

Vizhinjam – Organised Chaos.

The fishing theme continued on Day Two. This time, at Vizhinjam Harbour, 20k away, where larger vessels which spend several days at sea, bring in their catch. With a backdrop of mosques it is a vibrant, smelly, chaotic business orientated place and fascinating to visit. There is no pandering to tourists, it's a working fishing village and we made sure to keep out of the way of the hectic action.

The stinking sail fish carried on a porters head from the shore to a tuk tuk taxi dominates my memory of the port. I hope he had a good shower before going home!

Our second day ended with a city tour of Trivandrum which wasn't that inspiring but the markets and fort area around Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple were colourful but next morning we would move on to Cochin and more chanting fishermen

Chinese Fishing Nets in Kochi

According to the Kochi Chinese Fishing Net Owners Association "Chinese fishing nets have been used in Cochin for over 500 years, but are fast vanishing as economics are no longer favourable. Set up on bamboo and teak poles the nets suspended over the sea give the impression of being huge hammocks. Huge mechanical contrivances hold the 20m nets and a cantilever, with large stones suspended on ropes as

counterweights, is operated by five or six men.”

We found the whole area amazing. Here too, the men chant as they haul in the nets which often have a pitifully small catch, thus they rely on tips from tourists who can have a go at working the ropes. Food stalls have been set up so you can cook what you catch if you wish.

South of the Chinese nets are fishermen plying their trade in small canoes using the more familiar drift nets. Inland there are excellent restaurants, particularly Italian, with a selection of seafood pastas. I love art and there are fine examples of creative graffiti in the vicinity, which seems

to be tolerated by the authorities. Many of the images are political or satirical in nature while others are simply stunning pictures.

Cochin is a very attractive city and there are areas away from the beaches which deserve a visit.

Old Town

A surviving Dhobi Khana, or laundry, is a must see. All the washing is done by hand by lungi clad men and sari clad women in a row of concrete cubicles. The spotlessly clean, starched white sheets and colourful garbs are left to dry on long clothes lines in the blistering sun before being perfectly ironed.

The old town and pedestrianized Jewish

Quarter with their wealth of colonial architecture are essential too. There is a terrific selection of antique and souvenir shops, museums, an ancient synagogue and waterside eating places. It's also a good place to pick up tea and spices including cardamom, turmeric, vanilla, ginger and pepper which the state of Kerala is famous for. It's a friendly, relatively hassle free place to bargain with shopkeepers.

Kerala markets itself as "God's own Country" in "Incredible India!" The chanting fishermen stole the show for me, but there is plenty more on offer for those with time to explore further afield.





Colourful Fruit Stand



Fishing Nets



Sail fish being delivered to market



Fishermen

POCKET GUIDE

Airline

Silkair fly to Trivandrum and Cochin from Singapore

www.silkair.com

Hotel Trivandrum

Abad Harmonia Ayurvedic Beach Resort

<http://abadhotels.com>

Hotel Cochin

Abad Atrium

<http://abadhotels.com>

Travel Agent

IK Chin Travel arranges tours to Kerala

www.ikchin.com.sg



Nets at Kochi