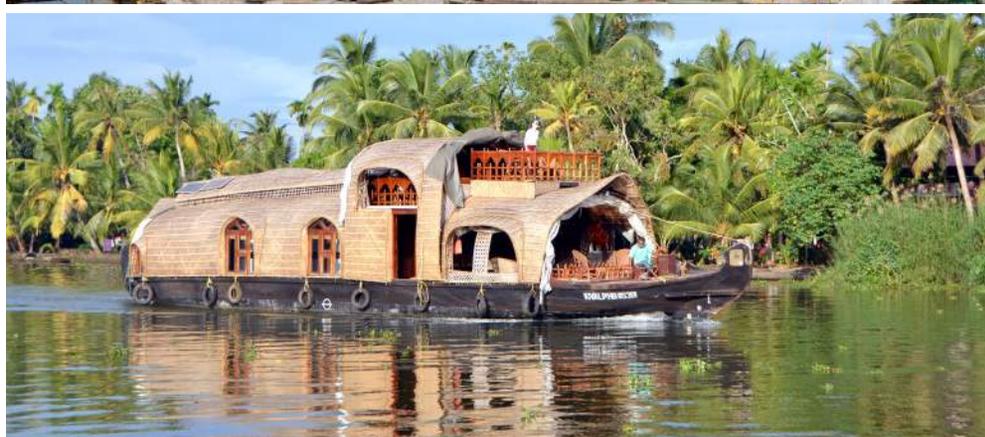




# The Chanting Fishermen of Kerala - Truly Incredible India!

Text & Images by Mike Smith





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

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

on previous trips! After a good night's sleep at the Abad Hotel and an early breakfast it was time to explore our neighbourhood. A short walk down a quiet street led to Chowara Beach where several groups of men in long lines were hauling in ropes, attached to fishing nets extending far out to sea. In a well-choreographed routine the back marker controlled the team of workers, he led the ritual chanting of encouragement and coiled the rope as the heavy fishing net was slowly pulled in. Team work at its best with each man knowing his own 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 a team pulling either end of a huge net to shore and moving closer together to form a circle with the net and hopefully trap their prey.



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.

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 too which posed nicely before flying off with a rotten fish carcass.

The men's work wasn't finished as the gang 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.

I returned to the beach after lunch and it was interesting to watch the fishermen diligently mending and drying their nets. Tomorrow their ritual would start again. Thanks to their 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.

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

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 any

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





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 intended to dine. The German Bakery at Lighthouse Beach in Kovalam was highly recommended for dinner by our guide and it turned out to be 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. Suddenly 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 eke out a living.





The fishing theme continued on day two. This time at Vizhinjam Harbour, twenty kilometres 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 here, 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 dominate my memory of this port. I hope he had a good shower before going home!



Sadly it was time to leave Trivandrum and continue our journey but first impressions of Kerala and in particular of the hard working, chanting fishermen were admirable.

What a great start to a holiday. Kerala markets itself as "God's own Country" in "Incredible India!" It clearly has a lot to offer and our forward itinerary was packed with many more exciting days including wildlife parks, tea plantations and a cruise on the famous houseboats so our fun would surely continue.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Singapore resident Mike Smith is a full time freelancer writer and photographer. He owns AsiaPhotoStock, a stock library featuring images of people, places and nature of Asia. His travel articles and photographs have appeared in numerous local and international magazines and his blog is widely read