



# BACKWATER CRUISE IN INDIA'S Kerala

By Anja Mutić

We arrived to a rain shower in Cochin. It was the second monsoon season in Kerala, one of India's southern states, when each afternoon brings a few hours of rain. We drove south, first along busy roads of Cochin's suburbs, lined with flashy roadside ads and car dealerships. As we veered off the main strip and into the back roads, the surroundings became more lush and scenic, offering glimpses of the waterways through dense foliage. We were, quite clearly, in the tropics.

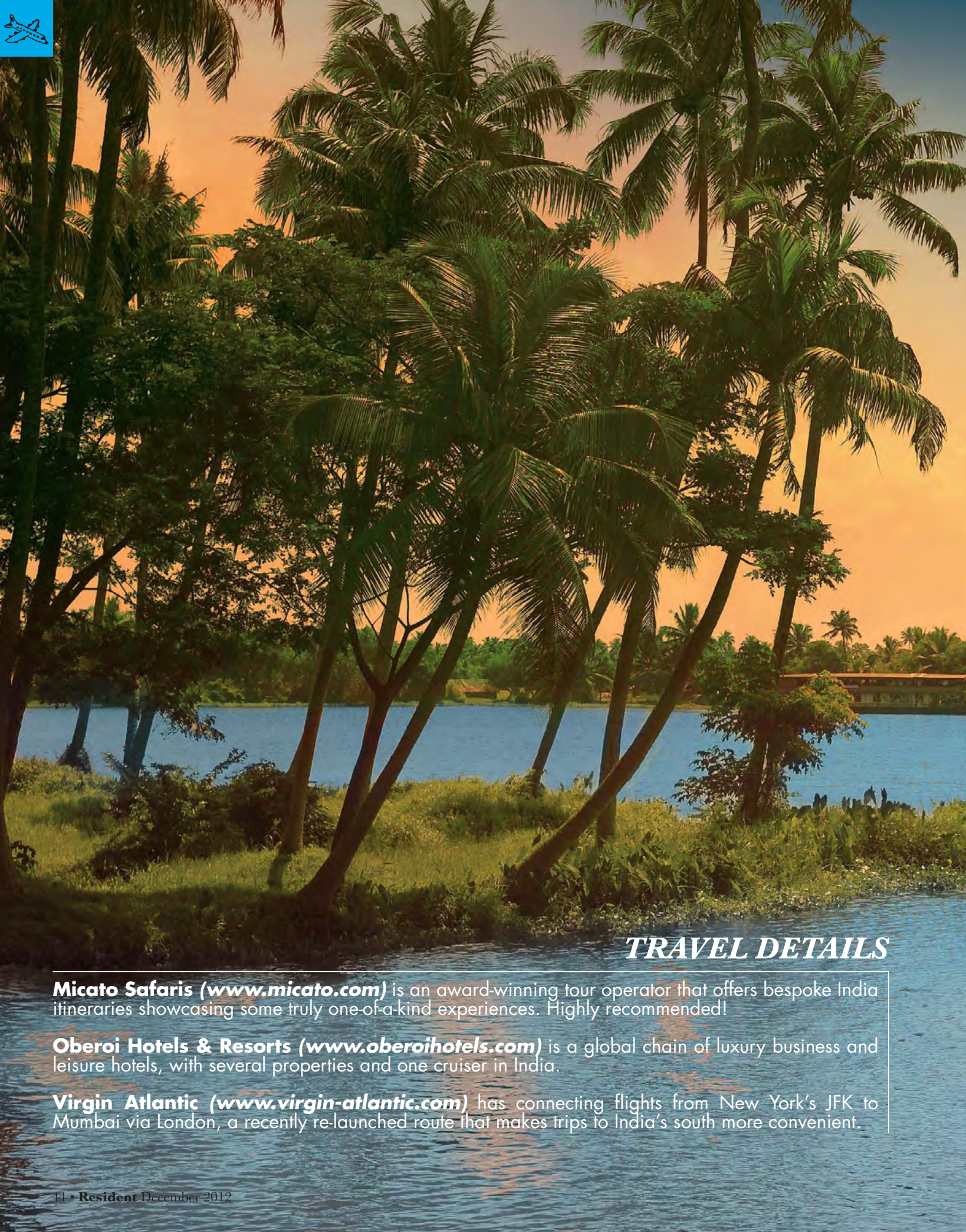
But just days before we had baked in the desert of Rajasthan, touring forts and mausoleums of Agra and Jaipur in sweltering sun. Micato Safaris, our

thoughtful and India-savvy host for the trip, had India's contrasts in mind. We had to travel far to get to the subcontinent, so why not show us the north and the south in one fell swoop? It was a pairing at once intense and yet so seamless. Looking back, I wouldn't do it any other way.

After a couple of hours' drive, a great welcome awaited us at the Vembanad Lake jetty – fresh towels, a signature bindi painted on our foreheads, a flower garland and fresh coconut water. Here, we were to board the Vrinda, the backwater cruiser by the luxury Oberoi Hotels and Resorts, which takes guests on a unique meander through Kerala's waterways. Vrinda would be our home for the next three nights.







## *TRAVEL DETAILS*

**Micato Safaris ([www.micato.com](http://www.micato.com))** is an award-winning tour operator that offers bespoke India itineraries showcasing some truly one-of-a-kind experiences. Highly recommended!

**Oberoi Hotels & Resorts ([www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com))** is a global chain of luxury business and leisure hotels, with several properties and one cruiser in India.

**Virgin Atlantic ([www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com))** has connecting flights from New York's JFK to Mumbai via London, a recently re-launched route that makes trips to India's south more convenient.



Vrinda was a beauty. In fact, in Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, Vrinda means beautiful and serene. Still, her surroundings stole the show. Docked right across an island known as Padramanal, which means “sands of night,” Vrinda offered gorgeous views of the isle at sunrise and sunset. From my deluxe cabin – one of eight – I could see the lake through the panoramic picture window. This made mornings a special treat, as gentle sunrays woke me up to the soothing sight of the waters, with fishing boats floating by.

Each evening of our stay we had a performance onboard, a nod to the rich traditions of Kerala. The standout was on the night of our arrival: a performance of Kathakali, a local dance - known for its elaborate makeup and colorful costumes - which tells stories from the ancient Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabarata. I loved how amazingly expressive it was, featuring lots of eye movement, good humor and laughs. The dance was accompanied with live percussions on the chenda and madalam drums, as the lead singer marked the beat with a chengila gong and his partner played the cimbals.

Cultural treats aside, the real highlight were

the waterways of Kerala, comprised of a lake and five rivers that lead to the Arabian Sea. For many years, the area went about its everyday business largely unknown to outside visitors. Then in the mid-1990s, backwater tourism took off. At first it was a destination for domestic tourists who came for houseboat holidays. International tourists quickly caught on; today thousands of houseboats ply these waterways between October and April.

Vrinda ventured out early the second day. From the deck we could see fishermen who stood in their small reef boats as cormorants flew overhead. Along a wide canal we passed the teak and coconut houseboats, some docked, others gliding past us. Our guide Joyce, a soft and discreet man, spoke of life in these backwaters with a sparkle in his eye. “The biggest crime here is stealing a coconut from your neighbor,” he joked.

After a couple of hours on Vrinda, we boarded a traditional rice boat better suited for navigating the narrower sections of the backwaters. These vessels were once used to transport spices and other cargo; today they’ve been remodeled for tourist purposes. As we passed bright colored houses, rice

paddies and small tea shops, I could see the truth in Kerala’s motto: ‘God’s own country’. Not only visually stunning, Kerala has natural bounty that could be an envy of many a world’s region. Each small house showcases its own little garden replete with fruit trees like mango, jackfruit, papaya, guava and bananas (there are no less than 18 banana varieties in Kerala), vegetables and spices such as ginger, cinnamon and cloves. Throw in lush flowers – hibiscus, marigold and gardenia – and a small well by each house, and you get a self-sufficient little heaven of a household.

The next few days consisted of one treat after another. There was a visit to a sacred forest grove known as the Snake Temple, a serene hideaway where women bring offerings like spice packets with turmeric, which removes all toxins from the area, and betelnut tree flowers. Another day we saw the half-statue of Lord Buddha, had a walk through one of the villages, passed picturesque stretches of the backwaters on the way to Alleppey, known as the Venice of the East, and visited a Christian church in the village of Champakulam on the afternoon they were taking down silver streamers for the annual festival of St Mary.

These daily morning outings were always accompanied by snacking on delicious banana and tapioca chips provided for us in wooden bowls on the rice boat. Food in fact was a major highlight. For breakfast, there was the delicious masala dosa, a southern Indian specialty which consists of rice pancake, sambar and coconut chutney, and the more northern besan cheela (a Rajashtani specialty of thin flour pancakes with a sweet porridge). Fruit juices and fresh fruit served with a side of mint yogurt were a great accompaniment to any breakfast dish. It was on Vrinda that we had what was my favorite meal of all on the two-week trip, which is a tall order. Sadya, a traditional southern feast, came served one afternoon on a banana leaf, with dishes such as curried clams with coconut and fennel, a cumin-flavored vegetable medley and curried prawns in a red chilly sauce. We learned that folding the banana leaf from top to bottom at the end of our meal meant that we liked the food and wanted to return for more some day. I folded mine carefully – top to bottom.

At lunch the following day we had a tasting of freshly collected toddy, locally known as kallu, an alcoholic beverage derived from palm or coconut trees. Another day we joined the chefs in the kitchen to see how authentic Kerala food is prepared. I loved seeing them use earthen pots and pans to cook up fresh pearl spot, a local fish, slathered with south Indian spices and wrapped in a banana leaf.

On the last night, after watching the sun set from the deck, we walked over to a nearby temple. It was a special holiday, celebrating one of the many Hindu gods – there are 330 million deities – and we found a colorful mass of people praying, a thousand candle lights alight as their offering prayer to the god. As I stood there taking in this moment, I made an indelible etching of Kerala on my mindscape: its gentle lapping of the water; balmy breeze, tranquil mornings. There it remained, a different kind of India. One which I could have never expected (who knew) and one, which will remain in my mind for a long time to come. •

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