

Lates 'N' Breaks

GO FOR IT

Edited by **VICKY LISSAMAN**

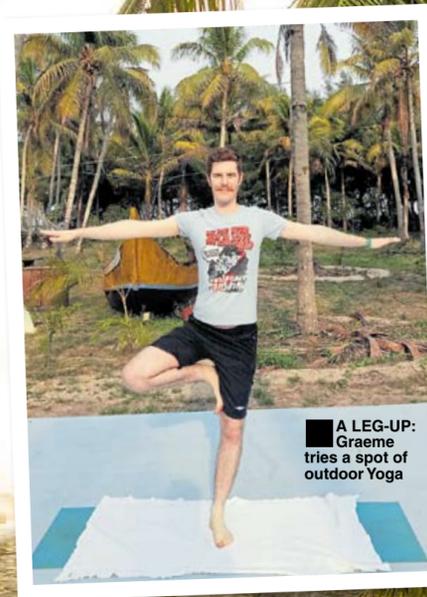


Lates 'N' Breaks

NORFOLK: Grab a four-night self-catering holiday at Caister-on-Sea Holiday Park near Great Yarmouth for £391 (saving 30%) per family. The price is based on a family of eight sharing Prestige accommodation. Arrive on July 9. Visit haven.com or call on 0333 202 5205.

COSTA DEL SOL: Grab seven nights on half-board at the four-star Roc Marbella Park Hotel in Marbella for £380. Jet out from Bristol on June 19. Hit easyjet.com/ holidays or dial 020 3499 5232.
CORNWALL: Seaport Lodge is a sea view cottage in Mawgan Porth near Newquay. Sleeps eight. Pay £1,333 for seven nights. Arrive on Friday. Visit sykescottages.co.uk or phone 01244 617 683. Property Ref. 959649.

KRAKOW: Fly out from Manchester on July 6 for three nights' B&B at the three-star Best Western Hotel Galicya for £259. See jet2holidays.com or 0800 408 5594.



A LEG-UP: Graeme tries a spot of outdoor Yoga

TURKEY: Enjoy seven nights on all-inclusive at the four-star Idas Hotel in Icmeler. Fly from Gatwick on July 10 for £415. Or from Newcastle on July 7 for £411. To book, visit travelrepublic.com or call 020 8974 7200.
BULGARIA: Hit Sunny Beach with a week's B&B at the four-star Hotel Zora for just £192. Go from Glasgow on June 25. Search onthebeach.co.uk or dial 0871 474 3000.
MADEIRA: Escape for seven nights of B&B at the three-star Dom Pedro Garajau Aparthotel in Canico for £284. You'll depart from Manchester on June 28. Search sunshine.co.uk.
FLORIDA: Pay £786 for seven nights at the four-star Hyatt Regency Hotel in Downtown Miami. Flight from Edinburgh on June 26. Book online at traveltrolley.co.uk.

Heal body and spirit in the tranquil waters of a sunny south Indian paradise

KERALA CHILL OUT



BLISSFUL: Houseboat on the backwaters and, below, Graeme has a meal on board

TUK-TUKS dart past in a blur, bikes weave around criss-crossing pedestrians, and free-roaming cats and hens scatter every which way.

Everyone is hurrying to get somewhere, but when I'm greeted with the warmest of welcomes, the disorientating muddle of south India's backstreets melts away.

All guests at the Xandari Harbour resort in Kochi, Kerala, receive a "namaskar" - a traditional Hindu "hello" with hands pressed together and a slight bow. The chilled vibes continue behind the hotel's swing door, which reveals landscaped gardens, an outdoor pool and a view of the tranquil Cochin River.

Huge bedrooms are decorated with mosaic flooring, some have egg-shaped baths, others have picture windows with views over the water. As the gentle sounds of the sitar float on the breeze, I'm served chai tea and banana fritters on the lawn. Dinner that night, a spectacular five-course Indian-fusion banquet, is in the resort's Restaurant 51, a 200-year-old former spice warehouse. Outside this peaceful

by **GRAEME CRITCHLEY**

gallery on Burgher Street is a great place to relax after the bustle of the city. Dishes include simple watermelon salad and grilled tuna accompanied by iced tea.

A traditional Kathakali show is held nightly on the Bazaar Road. Combining theatre, dance and rhythmic drum beats, actors share folk tales through facial expressions and eye movements. Audience participation is all part of the spectacle and I'm invited on stage to join the fun, shortly after Jayanth has severed the left ear, nose and breast of the devilish Jinn.

Legend has it the Hindu god Vishnu created Kerala by throwing his battle axe into the sea, splintering the region into a maze of lagoons, canals and lakes.

So I head out to a luxury Xandari Riverscapes Houseboat on the Vembanad Lake, near Alleppey for a memorable overnight stay.

Exploring the calm backwaters of the rice paddy fields and canoeing past palm tree-lined banks to remote villages is a blissful way to experience the real India.

Traditional Kettuvallam houseboats, made from jackfruit wood, are staffed by their own crew and chefs. The cooks prepare a traditional palm



BEACH CHUMS: Graeme playing cricket with the locals

retreat, Fort Cochin city - known as the gateway to tropical Kerala - is teeming with history.

The Portuguese, Dutch and eventually the British had influence here so it's a vibrant mix of cultures.

The first European to reach India by sea, the great Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama, was laid to rest here in St Francis Church in 1524.

I rise early next morning and witness the fishing boats heading out to sea. In Fort Cochin, centuries-old Chinese fishing nets loom high above the waters, operated by a giant cantilever.

Huge birds - Brahminy kites - are also up, circling for fish and carrion.

I visit The Mattancherry Palace, or Dutch Palace, to see its magnificent 16th century painted murals.

The Paradesi Synagogue, the only operational one in the state, is nearby, in the district known as Jew Town. Religious freedom and tolerance is paramount in India, and it's a place you'll find both the Jewish Star of David and the Hindu Swastika carved into the fabric of the buildings.

Fort Cochin is also a popular shopping destination, the narrow streets lined with shops selling fabrics, tea, precious stones and trinket boxes. Kashi Art Cafe and

leaf spread, rounded off with a fresh mango cocktail. Then I dive into the warm waters before finishing the night with a few drinks under the stars. A short drive down the coast is the magnificent Xandari Pearl. A unique resort, it has its own organic farm and around a third of the restaurant's food is cultivated there. The resort's jaw-dropping accommodation includes luxury villas with hammocks, plunge pools and outdoor showers. The Xandari Pearl's chefs demonstrate their skills and soon I'm devouring fresh curries and side dishes in the open air. With the Mararikulam beach metres from my villa, I go for an after-dinner stroll on the sands. Equipped with a cricket bat and stumps, I make friends with the locals, slogging the ball into the sea (for six) and struggling with erratic Indian spin bowling, as the sun sets over the water. The resort offers sunrise yoga sessions and I indulge in an Ayurvedic massage, a technique using warm, herbal oils, developed over thousands of years as a healing tool. It's little wonder Kerala is known as God's Own Country. This trip has left me fully rejuvenated in mind, body and spirit.



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DISPLAY: Centuries old Chinese fishing nets above Kochi

FactFile

GETTING there: Fly to Kerala with Emirates (emirates.com) via Dubai, Qatar (qatarairways.com) via Doha or Jet Airways (jetairways.com) via Mumbai for £500.
Where to stay: Rooms at Xandari Harbour, pictured, start from £120 per night.
A one-bedroom Xandari Riverscapes Houseboat starts from £200 per night.
A green pearl room at Xandari Pearl Resort starts from £120, and £160 for a blue pearl room. Book all accommodation via xandari.com.
Plaza Premium Lounges are operational in Heathrow Terminals 2, 3, 4 and 5.
Prices start from £40 for two hours' lounge access and includes alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, complimentary food and access to shower facilities.
For more information, or to book, visit Plaza-network.com.