

Kerala's Best Kept Secret

Marari beach, off the popular trail, is blessedly tranquil and lulls you into lolling on its sands, playing beach volleyball, glimpsing the pristine lifestyle of fisherfolk and gorging on their catch—cooked and served fusion-style at a luxe resort.

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At Marari, colourful fishing boats set out to sea at the crack of dawn and return in the afternoon with fresh catch

On a previous trip to Marari beach in Kerala, an hour's drive from Kochi, we had spied a huge billboard en route, advertising "God's Own Optician!" The optician obviously had a sense of humour for not only had he done a play of words with Kerala Tourism's tag line—God's Own Country—but the in-your-face advertisement had a photograph of a pair of huge spectacles staring into space in an omnipotent, all-seeing way. Beyond the offending advertisement rose a grove of palm trees, lush and green.

Our distress at how 21st century marketing had made inroads into this calm, rural Eden soon dissipated as the Kerala landscape swept past our car windows. Narrow country roads, lined with low-slung, red-tiled roof homes snuggling in the shade of fecund foliage and village shops strung with plump yellow and red bananas, wound and journeyed onward to our destination—Xandari Pearl.

Our arrival at the resort, which unfolded over 18 acres, was reassuring. Nothing much had changed in this quiescent corner of the country, barring some homestays near St Augustine's Church in neighbouring Mararikulam village and a few luxury resorts.

There was sensory bombardment aplenty and beachfront bliss awaited us at Marari. We were welcomed by a lissom Kerala girl in beige and gold-bordered Nasrani (Syrian Christian) attire who escorted us through her green domain to our pearl-shaped villa.

The 20-villa resort revealed its assets unabashedly in the course of our stroll—a glistening green fish pond rippling with marine life, a butterfly garden shimmering with the evanescent colours of butterfly wings, a pearl-shaped pool encircled by stands of coconut, mango and cashew trees and a spice garden, fragrant with cinnamon and pepper, and even a tucked-away farm with goats and the diminutive endangered Vechoor cow whose milk is valued in Ayurvedic medicine. Finally, we stepped into our spacious villa done up in soothing shades of shimmering pearl-grey, light green and a mother-of-pearl screen. Our temporary home, which came with a private plunge pool, garden, sandy sit-out, private dining area and a hammock, beckoned us to take a languid siesta.

However, we were urged to get to the beach where life carries on in its changeless, unsullied way. The glistening green grass underfoot was gilded by a wan sun, typical of the monsoon, as we headed for the stretch of cinnamon-coloured sand fringed by casuarina trees and coconut groves.

Traditionally, fisherfolk homes in Marari are set back from the beach and all we could see were a few colourful boats that generally set out to sea at the crack of dawn (not too far out

during the monsoon) and are back in the afternoon. Xandari Pearl thus fields the fresh catch of the day from its neighbours and imaginatively whips it up for guests who fill their crescent-shaped, thatched, open-sided restaurant.

During our stay, we frequented the beach where an uninterrupted snooze under green palms soothed by the sound of the tide lapping the shore was an undreamed of luxury. We relaxed, went with the flow, lay back and watched the clouds scud past overhead even as we enjoyed a deep sense of peace, away from the noisy anarchy of the country. Time ceased to have meaning even as we learnt to reconnect with the simple pleasures of life... the sight of local fishermen hauling in their catch, or clambering up palm trees to snag a tender coconut. Multi-hued birds spangled the skies and moments trembled with magic and promise.

We discarded our mobile phones and our footwear and strolled barefoot on the Champagne-hued sands; hung out with the local fisherfolk who offered us tea and a privileged insight into their simple, sustainable lives. They envied us our frantic pressure-cooker existence and we coveted theirs—so slow, rich and fulfilled.

Later, in the softly floodlit restaurant, we had a lemony drink, spiked with lemongrass and stirred with a bamboo shoot stirrer and sipped through a banana leaf straw. (The Xandari brand of simple understated luxury is built on the premise that the protection of the environment is primary hence their resorts are plastic-free.) We dined on local Kerala delicacies, mantled in subtle spices and often given a refreshing fusion twist—fresh seafood platter, brimming with calamari, king fish, mashed potatoes and broccoli florets; Kerala-style prawns with fluffy *appams*; and innovative palate pleasers like rice flour infused with saffron, coconut and meat, inserted into a bamboo and steamed, and accompanied by mutton curry; cane jaggery infused baked yogurt topped with prunes and so on.

The next morning, we cycled to the grand 16th century St Andrew's Basilica, located six km away in Arthunkal village. A service was in progress and the church, built by Portuguese missionaries, resonated with hymns even as a local whispered to us about a 16th century fair-skinned vicar, Father Fenicio, who possessed miraculous powers to cure the sick and mentally ill and performed many miracles. The good father died in 1632 and is considered the second apostle of the East. In 1647, the statue of St Sebastian, with arrows protruding from all over his bloodied body, was placed in this church. It was installed by the captain of a ship which stalled on the high seas and then drifted ashore only when the beleaguered skipper promised to mount the statue in the closest church. The feast of St Sebastian, held in January, draws believers

Frequent the Champagne-hued beach of Marari for an uninterrupted snooze under green palms, soothed by the sound of the tide lapping the shores



SHUTTERSTOCK



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(Clockwise from facing page) The grand 16th century St Andrew's Basilica, located six km away from Marari in Arthunkal village, has the statue of St Sebastian with arrows protruding from all over his bloodied body, and draws believers of all faiths; Marari beach is one of the most well-maintained beaches in Alleppey district; a spot of yoga and meditation at the Marari beachfront is a great way to unwind



GETTY IMAGES

The 20 villas at the Xandari Pearl resort in Marari come with a private plunge pool, garden and a hammock; the softly floodlit restaurant here serves local Kerala delicacies



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Air The nearest airport is at Kochi, an hour and a half away.

Rail The nearest local railway station is Mararikulam. Alapuzha (Alleppey) is another option with better connections.

Road Rental cars, buses and taxis are available for travel from the airport and railway stations.

STAY

Marari has a few no-frills homestays and accommodation options. Xandari Pearl, located on a secluded stretch of the beach, is the newest of the luxury resorts.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to May. The monsoon is pretty but a heavy downpour could dampen spirits.

EAT

This is a seafood paradise —gorge on the sizzling-fresh local *karimeen* fish in a zingy curry or baked over a coal fire, masala crabs and prawn curry, with rice or fluffy *appams*. The Kuttanad duck curry, while typical of the backwaters, is a must-try in this region too. The restaurants in the luxury hotels as well as homestays serve food fit for the gods, vegetarian included.

CONTACT

For more information, visit Kerala Tourism's official website: www.keralatourism.org



SUNSET MOMENTS

Camera ready. The sun has set. The sky is dull. No, don't turn and walk away, especially if you are on a beach. Wait. Sunset fireworks that light up the sky and loitering clouds in flaming colours generally occur a few minutes after the sun has dipped under the horizon. Play around with the metering system of your camera. Try spot metering. Take the reading from the highlights and shadows and see what gives you the best results. You have time as the performance can last around 15 to 20 minutes before darkness claims the sky.



of all faiths as the saint is said to heal the suffering of all who turn to him. Traditionally, devotees of Lord Ayappa, returning from the holy shrine of Sabarimala, stop to pay homage to St Sebastian at the basilica.

We were amazed that even in this sleepy refuge, one encounters the unexpected. Villagers told us about the famous Mannarsala or Nagaraja Temple, 32 km away to the south of Alleppey, where snake worship is a popular cult. What makes the temple unique is that it has a revered priestess (women are banned from the priesthood in the state). The lady has an almost mythical stature amongst her devotees and makes an appearance between 3 pm and 6 pm daily to bless them.

It is this quixotic melange of exotic cults, a friendly people and a rural ambience that makes Kerala a quiet and relaxing haven in the churning cauldron of the country.

Back at Marari, the days slipped by, playing beach volleyball and indulging in hedonistic spa therapies at the state-of-the-art spa where we wallowed in Ayurvedic massages. Warm oil made of medicinal herbs was dribbled on our bodies and then rubbed in by a trained masseuse with soft hands and a feather touch. A spot of yoga and healing meditation in the late afternoon, and then steaming hot milky *chai* from a mobile stall set up at the resort for local flavour, were followed by bouts of schmoozing with other guests.

We wished we could have lingered and spent more tranquil, barefoot days at this charmed spot; letting warm sand slip through our toes, inhaling lungfuls of fresh, salt-laden breeze and gazing at flaring sunsets that bled on the landscape and then suffused it with soft colours. We would linger to stargaze and watch a stainless steel sliver of a moon ride the sky. ♦