

“This Ayurveda”, Mr Shah explained, struggling to restrain himself, “it is royal prostitution!” We had found the subject that animated our rather avuncular government guide. “It is medicine, the hospitals do good work. You cannot sell it as massages and spas.” Which is a shame, as “Ayurvedic” (I use quotation marks out of respect for Mr Shah) massages are commonplace in the tourist hotspots of Kerala, and very enjoyable at that.

I had a romantic notion of hiring a kettuvallam, and spending several days sitting in the shade of its wicker canopy, getting lost, drifting around the backwaters. The reality of hot humidity and swarms of mosquitoes changed my mind. So, in the first Indian state to achieve full literacy, it seemed only right to take the government-run alternative, providing me with a gentle education into the bargain. Where would we go? No idea. I knew we were being picked up in the morning, and going on a boat. Other than that, I had little idea what to expect.

The educational aspect of this trip wasn't lost on some of the other participants. A Mumbai mother, three school-age children in tow, was keen to ensure that her offspring demonstrate just how eager the family was to learn. Her keenness and constantly raised hand weren't unwelcome: the heat and humidity of South India made it rather tricky to absorb some of the more obscure aspects of spice growing and coir production that appeared in his occasional pop quizzes (although these may have been entirely for the Mumbaikars' benefit).

A bus deposits us by the water. Our main boat for the day is something approaching a kettuvallam, the atmosphere surprisingly unspoilt by the plastic tables and chairs around the edges. At first, the still, brackish water is in wide, shimmering channels, flanked by palm-covered islands: an archetypal paradise. We cruise lazily among the shellfish-gatherers, but then land at an unlikely-looking spot on one of the islands. Hmm. This 15-minute walk through tropical undergrowth wasn't entirely expected. Neither was this breeze-block brick factory. We are taught about one of the area's industries next to the furnaces, and I really start regretting how little water I'd brought with me.

Deeper into the island, and we find ourselves in a spice garden. Mr Shah cuts us pieces of leaf, root and bark: cinnamon, coriander, mustard seed, cardamom, tamarind, all the flavours of Kerala. All served with salt. I feel the moisture drain from my body with every second that passes. Luckily, it appears that the spice growers compensate for Mr Shah's generous off-cuts by selling water to thirsty tour groups. Perhaps they supplied the salt, too.

It seems we've come a rather roundabout route, as we're back on the boat in no time, where two women have appeared with a trestle table, gas stove, and several bags full of vegetables. The hot oil pops with mustard seed and coriander, and my attempts to keep track of some of the ingredients quickly fall by the wayside. Ten minutes later, we are presented with plates of sambar, iddly, dosa, and many more dishes lost in translation. This is not just a feast, it's a government tour group feast: fragrant, frugal, and served on paper plates, sat on plastic chairs, on a wooden boat, under endless palm trees. It's hard to fault.

Unexpectedly, it's not a boat that carries us onward from here, it's something that looks like a cross between a bus and a pick-up truck. The fact it's not water-going is slightly disconcerting, as is the drop-off point: a crumbling concrete bridge. We scramble down a path at its side where, thankfully, there are some narrow, punt-like boats waiting to take us onwards. Ah, water again! But why the large machetes?

Happily, we're not headed into some backwater badlands, but rather some tiny, overgrown canals

leading us into ever denser forests, calm and still in parts, dominated by raucous twittering (of the old-fashioned kind) in others. Between the density of plant and animal life, the constantly changing light through the trees, the swoosh of machetes cutting away new growth blocking our path, you could be forgiven for believing we were on voyage of discovery through uncharted jungle. That is, until we stopped, scrambled up another bank, and were led through clearings to watch a man shimmy up a palm tree accompanied by Mr Shah's commentary on coconut and coir production.

Kerala's government can be rightly proud of its educational achievements, every bit as much as of its natural heritage. There is something reassuring, yet faintly amusing, about the earnestness of this trip against a backdrop of such lazy beauty. It works, though: I'm still cynical about packaged Ayurveda.