

# Discover India

September 1997

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# Discover India

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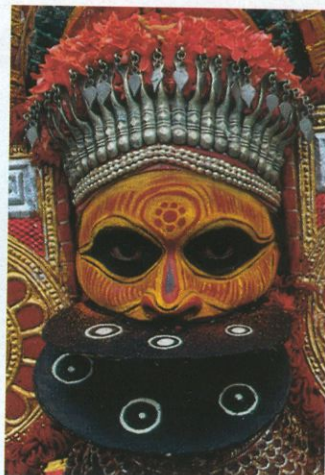
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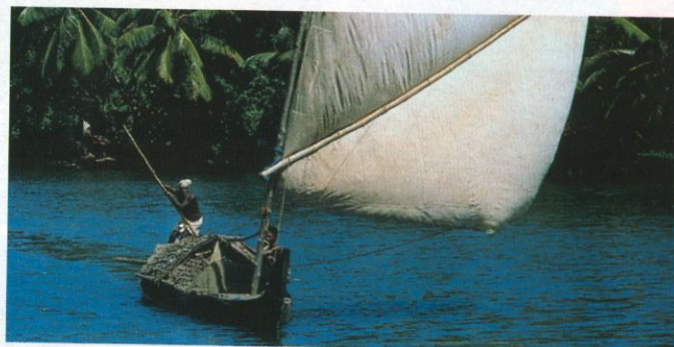
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### Erratum

In the box given with the article "Kerala's Enchanting Backwaters" in the July 1997, New Circuits, issue of Discover India, Cochin's new name is given as Kozhikode, in place of Kochi. It is Calicut that is now known as Kozhikode. *Editor*



# The Monsoon in Kerala

Text and photographs: Nihal Mathur

*The coastal state of Kerala is the first to receive and last to be touched by the SW monsoon as it leaves the sub continent. Drawn over a period of six months — June to November — the monsoon is a special time in Kerala.*



From the ocean, waters arise as dark clouds. Riding the swift monsoon winds, the clouds bring rain every year in the first week of June. The historic meteorological observatory in Thiruvananthapuram, has records available on the arrival of the SW monsoon since 1885! From the table of occurrences one finds that the SW monsoon has arrived as early as 18th May in 1918 and 1995 and as late as 11th June in 1972. The highest number of occasions of onset, however, is eight times on first June.

As the monsoon strikes the Malabar Coast, the sea, the sky and the rain become one ominous entity. There is a roar of the elements that is truly frightening and momentarily one panics! It's the deluge! The waters are taking over! But luckily no such thing happens as one quietly witnesses the spectacle of power and fury of the SW monsoon.



In June, the rain is a continuous affair, sometimes falling unabated for three to four days, often a week, or even ten days at a stretch at some places. For a Malyalee, this is the *kalavarsham* or the timely seasonal rain that falls morning, noon and night whether in a fine drizzle or a thick downpour!

Despite the nonstop rain, there is no apparent disruption in life. It is business as usual for the Malyalee who is a fiercely political person, quick to remonstrate and make public the grievance. Here we see a procession of protesting marchers in downtown Ernakulam whose ardour is not dampened by the pouring rain.





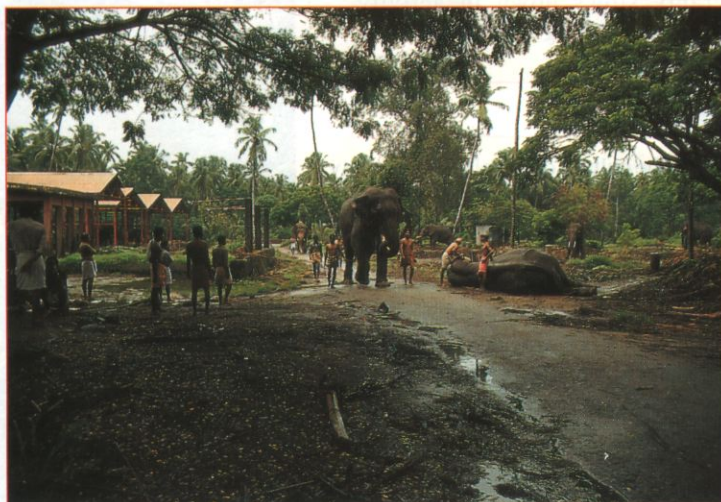
Whether it is fern, grass or creeper, plant or tree — everything turns over a new leaf with renewed vigour and growth, in shades of glistening green. So, it is indeed the largesse of the rains that gives this coastal state a befitting epithet of “Green Kerala.” And nothing in Kerala can be greener than paddy! With the onset of the SW monsoon rains, the Keralite farmer begins work on the *punja* crop. This is also the time when the plantation work begins on coconut and banana — two fruits intrinsic to Kerala’s culture.



If there is any season especially designed for the children in Kerala, it is undoubtedly the rains! Who says they are locked indoors? With water everywhere, there is sheer joy of getting wet besides, of course, splashing and swimming or simple wading through knee deep waters just for the heck of it! Rains is fun time. No wonder contemporary writers and poets of Kerala find rain a metaphor to recollect the magic of lost childhood.



While the monsoon slows down the pace of modern industry, for the traditional ones it marks the period of enforced rest. Work comes to a near halt at Beypore near Kozhikode which is famous for its boat making tradition. For hundreds of years seafaring *dhow*s are being made in Beypore by Malyalee architects and master craftsmen for their Arab clients. Some measure of protection from the incessant rain is provided to the boats under construction by covering them with a thatching of coconut fronds.

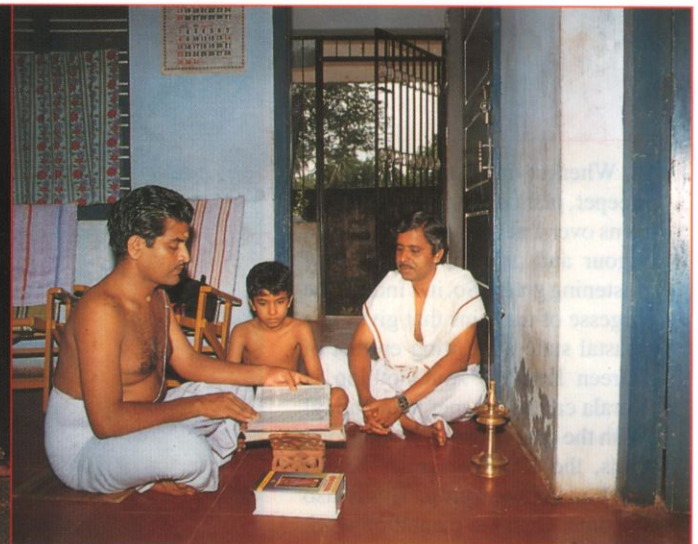


Kerala’s hoary tradition declares the rainy months of June and July as one of rest and recuperation. Now is the time to concentrate on the body and build physical health. No wonder this time of the year is also called the *ausudhi maasa* or the month of taking medicines. Even the famous temple elephants of Kerala take a break during the rains. Here in the Punnathur Kota, a home to 40 elephants of the Guruvayoor temple, we see the pachyderms are given a special diet of boiled rice mixed with traditional and modern medicines.





The establishment of the SW monsoon also puts a full stop to the performing arts, most of which are essentially linked to the temple. There are no performing art events in June and in July there are just a few. This is the time for practice and tuning up the body. Here we see two members of a Krishnattam troupe in Guruvayoor who are given a massage by their instructors. This regimen continues till the festival of Onam after which they will once again start with regular performances.



Traditionally, the Malyalee month of *karkidakam* beginning somewhere in July, is considered inauspicious, in as much as the continuous rains make it impossible for a public celebration. Consequently *karkidakam* is also termed as the *Ramayana maasa* or the month to read the holy scriptures. However, despite the changes brought about by modern times, the old tradition continues. There are homes where the evening lamp is lit and the *Ramayana* actually read by a senior member of the family while others sit and listen.



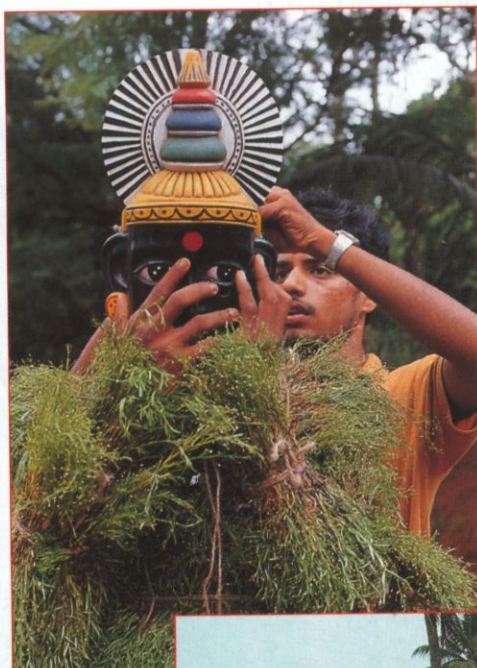
Just as June and July are the phase of 'Onset and Establishment', of the SW monsoon, the following two months of August and September are those of 'Prevalence' when it considerably slows down in activity. This is a period of little rain when many boat racing events, which are synonymous with Kerala, take place.

*Pazham* or banana is intrinsic to the culture of Kerala. It is not only consumed as food and medicine but is also used in ritual and ceremony and of course offered to the gods in prayer. Although there are countries which are much bigger producers and consumers of the banana, none can match the sheer diversity of the species in India specifically Kerala where there are more than twenty edible varieties besides non-edible and ornamental one. It is during this time of lull in the rains in mid August that the farmer harvest the banana crops. Here harvested bananas being stacked for transportation at a farm in Mallapuram, heart of banana country.

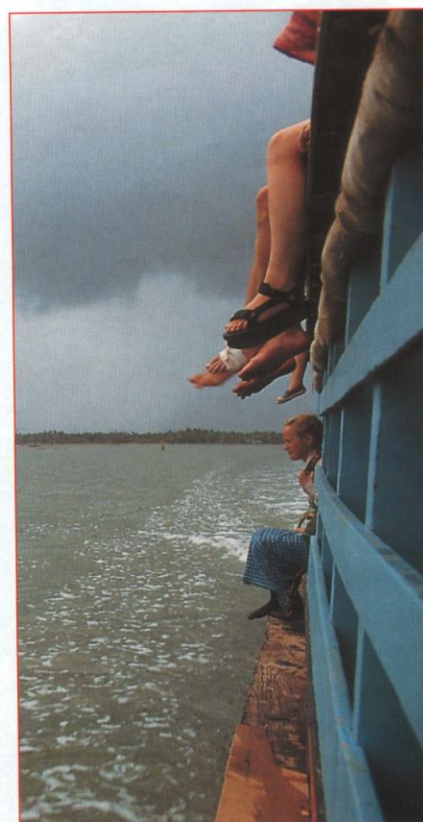




Half way through the monsoon there is respite from the rain and it is during this time that Kerala's biggest and most important festival, Onam, is held. There are all kinds of cultural programmes replete with the classical art performances. But what is endearing is the dynamic expression of young working class men who culminate their week long Onam celebrations in spirited street performances. *Pulikalli* or Tiger Play is one such tradition where the young men paint themselves as wild felines and then take to the streets with vigorous dancing.



Celebrated on the fourth day of Onam, *kummatti* is performed around Trichur. groups of young boys cover themselves in *kummatti*, a type of grass that grows briefly only during the rainy season. then they don colourful masks and take to the street, dancing to the beat of the drums. Stopping every now and then at intersections, the well disguised artiste often seizes the opportunity to expose social evils and lampoon the erring leaders to the great delight of the audience.



September is the best time to travel through the Kuttanad or the Backwaters of Kerala. Cleansed by the rivers rushing down from the *ghats*, the Backwaters are full and flowing. A ferry trip from Alapuzza to Kollam takes one through a tropical paradise. Drifting slowly down small connecting canals to open large lakes one sails through the hinterlands which showcases the rural life of Kerala. The best seats in the ferry are, of course, on top of the corrugated roof!



The rains spurt back to life in October. The Malyalee calls it the *thulavarsham* or the rain coming in their month of *thulam*. This is the last and retreating phase of the SW monsoon when it finally leaves the Indian subcontinent in the first week of December. But not before it has showered another 50 centimetres of rain. Compared to 200 centimetres of the first phase of the SW monsoon, this may seem paltry but has greater potential in creating flood havoc. Here we see flooded *Kuttanad* or the Backwaters.

