

Family

Sugar and spice

How do you keep two easily bored girls amused on a driving tour? Try breaking the journey with beaches, treehouses and meals you can eat with your fingers, says Caroline Phillips

We were sleeping 40ft off the ground, atop red flame trees, in a magical treehouse

reached by a gangway. It had stupendous views over coffee plantations and a tree growing through our bedroom. At night, fireflies sparkled like fairy dust and we nodded off to the sound of cicadas. "Beware! With the coffee ripening, monkeys are on the prowl," read a bedside notice. "Don't be alarmed if you hear strange noises on your roof."

Next morning, 25 monkeys played on our arboreal terrace, swinging off its gnarled coffee-branch balustrade. They switched our outside lights on and off, peered greedily through the windows at our possessions, and one licked our window before wiping it with his paw. I'd happily be reincarnated as a monkey if it meant living here.

My two daughters (aged 11 and

13) and I were being driven around northern Kerala, India - a place only now opening itself to tourists. Instead of flying direct to Kerala, we started in Bengalooru (previously Bangalore) and drove south slowly, the better to savour the contrasts. India is a difficult place to travel. I'd been 10 times before, and wanted to do it very differently this time. Travelling alone with children, I didn't want a holiday of missed train connections and pitching up in places that, despite research, turned out to be horrible. Pre-booking a trip with an excellent driver meant everything ran as smoothly as ghee, and allowed us to see things we'd have missed from trains.

Kerala's scenery is the lush, verdant stuff of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, with plentiful food (paddy fields, spice plantations, coconut groves) and rain. It's also relatively wealthy, with many Keralans working in the Persian Gulf. I hadn't been here for 30 years - and then not to the north, which "feels like a region apart" according to the Rough Guide.

The north is dominated by the



Indian summer... (clockwise) looking out from Neelshwar Hermitage; Caroline's daughters go for a ride; the treehouse at Tranquil homestay; a dancer taking part in a Hindu theyyam ritual; a prawn curry



Western Ghats (and boasts mostly tea and coffee plantations), and is much hillier than the south (where they grow spices, rubber and bananas). It's also less densely populated and developed, primarily due to lack of infrastructure. There are no trains through the hills, just long journeys on winding roads. For 20 years, the south has been swamped by tourist groups heading to the backwaters (just one hour from Kochi, formerly Cochin) and then to Kovalam's beachside properties. By contrast, there are no group tours to north Kerala, which offers untouched beaches, better wildlife parks, more authentic accommodation - and is now developing nature, wilderness, eco,

spice, jungle and beach tourism.

On our first day in Kerala, we broke for lunch in nondescript Kannur, waiting gormlessly to be seated among throngs of lungi-clad men eating with their right hands in sauna-heat underneath clacking fans. People spoke only Malayalam, the palindrome language of Kerala. Eventually we twiggled the system. Would-be diners bought meal tickets then crowded around anyone close to finishing, pouncing on the seats in a version of musical chairs. Soon we were eating delicious coconut curries from stainless steel thalis, 45 rupees (around 60p) for three of us.

After passing turmeric, indigo- and lime-coloured villages, piles of finger-sized bananas, geriatric Ambassador

cars and sickle-and-scythe posters of the still-influential communist party (north Kerala is the India of yesterday), we reached the Kasaragod district: a land new to tourism. We arrived at the fishermen's-style thatched cottages of the Ayurvedic hotel and retreat, Neelshwar Hermitage, to the thunderous applause of a tropical storm. "You bring us luck," said a local, welcoming us with *kumkam*-powder bhindis and jasmine garlands. "The gods and the monsoon have come with you."

Built following the architectural principles of Kerala *vastu*, a kind of Hindu feng shui, it's a place of palm-fringed peace set on miles of "undiscovered" beach. This is a location for sublime Ayurvedic treatments

(whose efficacy is allegedly enhanced during monsoon season), even the names of which soothe the spirits: *sajoyya, sandwana, swastha, sradha*.

We were asked to be sensitive to traditional customs by wearing tops and long sarongs on the beach. "Your good name, madam? Which grade are your children?" six boys independently enquired of us on the beach, before whipping out mobile phones. "Your photo, please." Neelshwar's sand is pristine, thanks to two full-time beachcombers, though venture further afield and you'll face the plastic detritus that the tide brings in.

With few nearby attractions, we spent the next two days relaxing, practising yoga and eating fresh fish in the beachside restaurant, and lying in hammocks or swimming in the infinity pool, the nearby waves lapping gently.

Our next stop was Tellicherry, a former colonial trading port. The three-hour drive took us past waterways of *kettuvallam* (traditional rowing barges), and extraordinary trees seemingly sprouting loofahs and cotton-wool buds, on to dusty roads where stallholders touted palm-sugar juice while myna birds, vultures, kites and bee-eaters circled. Six khaki-clad officers stood by a rickshaw driver, pouring his brandy on to the road. "The first day of every month is dry," explained our driver, Pramod. "You can be put in jail for selling alcohol."

We were staying in Ayesha Manzil homestay with its owners: Mr CP Moosa (he likes to be called "Moosa") and his wife, Faiza. Author and Indophile William Dalrymple maintains that Faiza, a cookery teacher, makes the best food in Kerala. Moosa, a descendant of gold traders, is a Moppila Muslim - one of India's oldest Muslim communities - and theirs is a cuisine of the Malabar coast fused with that of their Arab forefathers.

The Moosas' 1862 colonial home, built by one Murdoch Brown of the East India company, has six somewhat tired bedrooms, family antiques and four-poster beds, plus nutmeg, jackfruit and papaya in the garden. As



we sat on the verandah, overlooking the ocean and the coastal road below, we were served subtle, delicate dishes: seafood simmered in coconut, bitter gourd with alchemical mixtures of spices, yam, chickpeas. "Cricket was first played in Tellicherry and so, too, the first teacake baked," explained Moosa, proudly. "We also made the first tapioca crisps here."

That afternoon by its pool, something suddenly thudded on to my head. A coconut? My daughters cracked up giggling. It turned out to be a dive-bombing eagle, possibly having spied its reflection in the sunglasses perched on my head, and swooped for the "prey". Its attack happened too quickly to be scary and, afterwards, its claw marks hurt less than our laughter. "That's very rare," smiled Faiza later, standing breaking cinnamon bark, squeezing tamarinds and giving my children *jaggery* (lumps of unrefined sugar). A gentle woman with a PhD in English literature, she was cooking tantalising combinations of seafood and spices in a wok-like *kadai* pan. Sandalwood incense burned, a lizard crawled up the wall.

In the morning, Moosa walked us through the fish market minutes from his home, near groups of itinerant building labourers waiting for work, past stalls selling banana blossom, drumsticks and tapioca root, and down

We drove past lime-coloured villages and geriatric cars - this is the India of yesteryear



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Way to go

Getting there

A seven night trip to Kerala with Scott Dunn (020-8682 5075, scottdunn.com) starts at £1,695 per person, including full-board accommodation (except Neelshwar which is on a B&B basis) international flights with Kingfisher Airlines and a driver and car. Direct flights from London with Kingfisher Airlines (0800 047 0810, flyingkingfisher.com) cost from £389.60 rtn inc tax to Bengalooru, £471.90 to Kochi or £461 to Calicut (with an overnight stopover in Bengalooru).



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