

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

ALLEPPEY

The Backwater Capital

No. KL-02 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

A lake the length of a county, rice fields up to three metres below it, and a town a Dewan planned around two canals — Alleppey is the backwaters' capital, and the honest version is better than the brochure.

Vembanad is India's longest lake; Kuttanad, the delta at its southern end, is the only place in India where rice grows below sea level, behind bunds the farmers built by hand. The houseboat night everyone comes for is real and worth doing once — if you know the prices, the AC rules, the mooring clusters and the pollution certificate to ask for. The better days are by canoe through Kainakary's canals, on the thirty-rupee public ferry to Kottayam, and at Marari's fishing beach. Come November to March; the August boat race is the other reason.

Founded

1762·1790s

Port opened 1762 (disputed); planned as a town by Dewan Raja Kesavadas in the 1790s

Best months

Nov – Mar

October is about as wet as August here

Give it

2–3 days

one houseboat night, then the canals by canoe

From Kochi

1½ – 2 h

≈ 55 km from Ernakulam; 75–85 km from the airport

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I WATER MAKES THE LAND

Vembanad runs 96 km; 398 square kilometres of its wetland lie below sea level. Kuttanad, where four rivers meet the lake, is India's lowest land: rice fields up to three metres below the water, won from the lake-bed since the 1860s by bunds of coconut poles, sand and clay, drained by pumps the region invented. Joseph Murickan, the 'Kayal Raja', reclaimed some two thousand acres in three kayals around 1940 and named them for the royal family; land reform took 1,600 acres in 1975 and gave them to 1,580 farmers. The FAO calls the whole system a globally important agricultural heritage.

II A DEWAN BUILDS A PORT · 1760s-1799

Alappuzha is one of Kerala's few planned towns. Travancore opened a port here to break the Dutch hold on the coast; its Dewan Raja Kesavadas cut two parallel canals from the lake to the sea in the 1790s, built warehouses, invited merchants from Surat and Kutch, and made the town the kingdom's financial nerve — then died, poisoned by the telling, in 1799, his assets confiscated.

III THE GOLDEN FIBRE · 1859-1950s

In 1859 an Irish-born New Yorker, James Darragh, opened India's first coir-matting factory here and was called, by one contemporary account, 'King of the Coast'. The pier (1862) and lighthouse (lit 1862) served his trade; European houses followed. The factories bred Kerala's labour movement — Travancore's first union in 1922, its first political strike in 1938, the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising of 1946. The pier has seen no ship since 1989; Kerala still makes about sixty per cent of the world's white coir.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 The mooring

Ask for a west-facing mooring when you book — the sunset from the deck is the photograph, and the cluster at Punnamada faces the wrong way.

2 The AC clause

On the rate card: most deluxe-band boats cool the bedrooms from 9pm to 6am. If you want afternoon air-conditioning, that's the premium band.

3 The certificate

A Maritime Board pollution-prevention certificate has been mandatory since April 2026; a boat without one is breaking the law and the lake.

4 The kitchen

Food should be cooked aboard — a cold land kitchen in plastic boxes is the cheap boat's tell. Karimeen is the lunch to ask for.

5 The alternative

A shikara for two hours at sunset (₹700–1,500) or a sunrise kayak (₹499) sees the narrow canals the houseboat can't enter.

One more thing

One night, not two — then a Kuttanad homestay or Marari's beach. Book a Gold- or Diamond-classified boat through an operator with cancellation terms, never a tout at the station; cruise the Kuttanad canals rather than the open lake; and be on deck, west-facing, at half past five.

01 ARRIVAL

Mist on the canal

A Kainakary canal · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Canoe → mist → palms

02 THE BEACH

Boats landing at Marari

Mararikulam beach · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Boats landing; family watching

03 THE CANAL

Through the narrow water

Kainakary's side canals · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Child at the bow; banks closing in

04 THE BUND

The paddy below the water

A bund road at Kainakary · Morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Water one side, paddy below the other, family between

05 THE RIVER CHURCH

Champakulam

St Mary's Forane Church · Morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Church, family on the steps, shed at the edge

06 THE SNAKE BOAT

The chundan

Punnamada Lake · Dawn or dusk, in season · 1x · landscape · 2x

Stern, paddlers, family on the bank