

Float through the backwaters of Vembanad Lake

♥ Russet sunsets, fishing, bird-watching

🕒 December

Coconut trees lean over the waterways that feed Vembanad Lake, making the backwaters of Vaikom, Kerala, an idyllic place to catch a dramatic silhouette at sunset. Rowers slice through overgrown patches of water hyacinths that crowd the canals, which, most often, provide the only access to the plantations that sustain the locals' livelihood.

As the longest lake in India, Vembanad Lake features miles of waterway through which to glide, one half of it a freshwater basin for river drainage, the other half a melange of brackish water from the Arabian Sea. On a brilliant day, the surface stands motionless like a single pane of glass, mirroring the heavens above.

Lakeside luxury

Lining the lake are sprawling four- and five-star bungalows

that beckon to tourists looking for quiet respite from the rest of the country's teeming cities. Stress melts away amid the plush bedding, infinity pools and elegant, wood-panelled lodges that these resorts tout. Visitors taste delicacies of tilapia, bitter gourd and tapioca, seasoned with fragrant curry leaves, ginger, cumin and cloves, and steeped in rich coconut milk and tamarind gravies.

Luxurious experiences extend onto the lake where 100ft (30.5m) houseboats intricately crafted of coconut fibres, bamboo, rope and teak wood float alongside anglers' canoes. Initially used to haul cargo (at one time these vessels even carried royalty), they now deliver comfortable – if not ritzy – accommodation and transport at once.



Right: A fisherman casts a net from his canoe

Below: A traditional Kerala houseboat moored beside coconut palms



Q&A

What's so special about Vembanad Lake? It plays an important role in the region's biodiversity and economy through fishing, farming and tourism. Around August, the lake springs to life as visitors and locals swarm to its banks for the annual snake-boat races to mark Onam harvest celebrations.

How do you spend eight hours on a houseboat? Don't be fooled by the thatched roof – a deluxe houseboat offers a sumptuous resort experience with pristine views, while providing a glimpse into local life.

Sold. What should I pack? Bring a pair of binoculars and keep your eyes open for egret, heron, owls, woodpeckers and kingfishers. I have fond memories of boat trips for family reunions when we would play cards or indulge in the local toddy, a wine-like beverage made from the coconut trees.

Joseph Karathedathu, who grew up in Kottayam district



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Admire the intricate act of fishing

Mesh Chinese fishing nets hover above the reflective surface of the lake. Fishers have carefully laid out contraptions held together by teak wood and bamboo poles, which they operate through a rhythmic balancing act at intervals throughout the day. A team of fishers place their weight on the main plank of the apparatus to lower the net into the water and then raise it again after some time using ropes. In the mornings and evenings, the synchronised movement resembles a dance.

In recent years, the livelihood of anglers has been at odds with the lowland farmers, due to the construction of the Thaneermukkom Bund, a mud-regulating dam that stretches from the Kottayam to Alappuzha districts. While the barrier has kept saltwater out of lower rice paddies situated below sea level, lake fishers fear that fish populations have dwindled.

Right: Water hyacinths carpet the canals

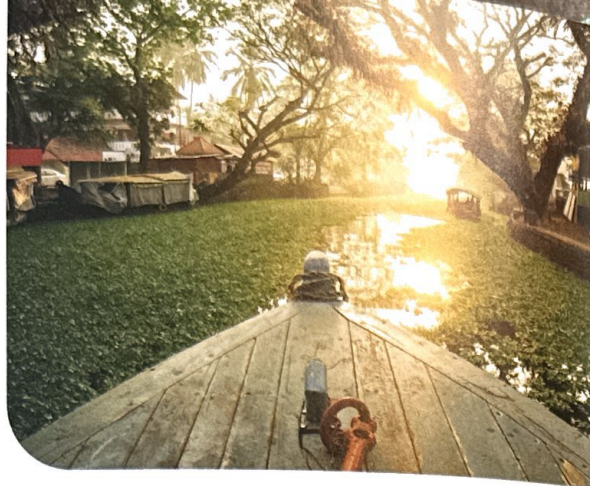
Far right: The tea plantations of Munnar are a cool and refreshing escape

Learn about local customs

Water transport in this part of Kerala (branded as 'God's Own Country'), is a way of life for the locals, many of whom practise Syro-Malabar Catholicism. This Roman Catholic sect, recognised by the Vatican, can be traced back to the group of people converted by St Thomas the Apostle along India's Malabar Coast. In the peak December season, illuminated Christmas stars adorn the doorways of most storefronts and homes, and churches brim with parishioners.

Don't Miss

- Spending an overnight stay on a houseboat
- Savouring Malabar meen curry (fish fry)
- Sipping tender coconut water from a riverside vendor



Find Your Joy

Getting there

Fly into Kochi, and take a 1.5-hour taxi or private car to Kumarakom. Buses run from Kochi airport to the

towns banking the lake, though they take longer (just over two hours) than travel by car for roughly half the price.

Accessibility

Houseboats and docks are wheelchair accessible.

When to go

December is the peak time to visit, as the monsoons have passed

and the weather is temperate. Given this state's widespread Syro-Malabar Catholic traditions, Christmas festivities are also in full swing.

Further information

• Houseboats or fishing with anglers must be booked in advance. Prebook houseboat day trips from Kumarakom,

where most tourist resorts are located.

- Stay and dine at resorts or guesthouses like the Taj Kumarakom Resort & Spa, Coconut Creek Homestay, or Coconut Lagoon CGH Earth Resort.
- Enjoy refreshments at the Thollayiram Chira Toddy Parlour.

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Other Quiet Indian Eco-Tourism Retreats

Thekkady Wildlife Reserve & Periyar National Park

In the untamed wilderness and exposed grasslands of Thekkady, beasts and birds abound. The tropical forest stands unstirring and hushed, save for the barking of a chital or the howl of a peacock caught in the claws of India's most coveted sight in these parts: the Bengal tiger. The lucky few might catch a fleeting glimpse of the solitary cat.

Don't miss

Spotting other grazing fauna, such as the Indian elephant, wild boar, gaur and deer.

Munnar Tea Estates

Retreat to the undulating hills of Munnar to behold the manicured tea and spice plantations carpeting the base of the Western Ghats. Veils of mist drift at these cooler altitudes, the verdant landscapes hinting at centuries-worth of tea exports. Breathing in the pure air provides a detoxifying experience.

Don't miss

Walking alongside rural tea pluckers as they weave through the sea of neatly arranged plots.

