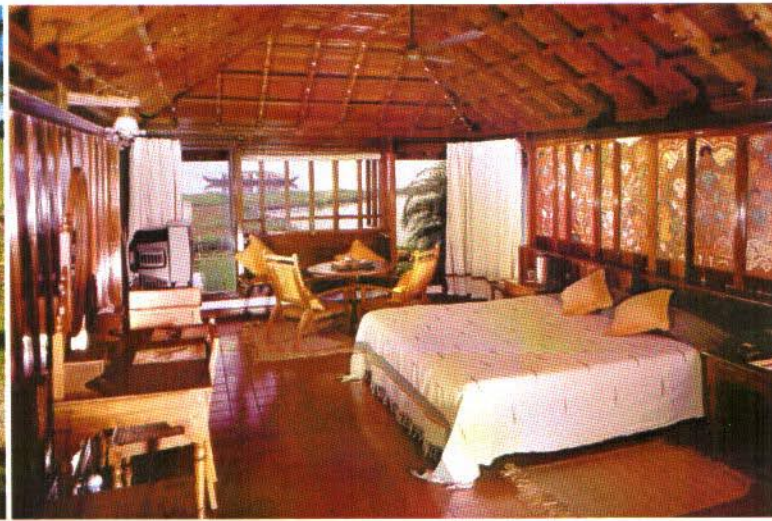


An Indian indulgence

One of the must-see paradises of the world



When 167,000 travel agencies in over 140 countries cast their votes for the World Travel Awards (WTA) and then pick Kumarakom Lake Resort as India's leading resort, you can be pretty sure this is a special place.

The Wall Street Journal calls the WTA the "travel industry's equivalent to the Oscars." Indeed, this is one of the world's most comprehensive travel trade polls around, and with its media partner, BBC World, the WTA's September event was broadcast to 254 million homes in over 200 countries.

The subject of all this success, Kumarakom Lake Resort, sits by the backwaters of Lake Vembanad in Kerala, India, which National Geographic Traveler referred to as "one of the must-see paradises of the world." This dreamy watery world has 1,500 kilometres of waterways that have been used as local transport for centuries. Lush vegetation, palms, and groves of coconut line the shores. Life is slow here. Drift down the water, and look at the palm-thatched homes, the whitewashed churches, mosques, and Hindu temples. Log bridges hold children, satchels firmly in hand, as they walk to school. Fishermen slide by in longboats with swooping prows.

Kumarakom Lake Resort reflects the hospitable culture and languid beauty of this area.

There are fifty-one villas, many of which are 100-year-old mansions that were transplanted from their original properties all around Kerala. They've been exquisitely refurbished and situated carefully in the lush 24-acre garden landscape—twenty-six of them with their front doors opening onto the banks of the 250-metre-long meandering pool.

The décor is polished rusticity—a blend of elegantly lush fabrics, handcrafted furniture, and chic detailing, making it no surprise that this property is a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World and has also been awarded the Asian Architectural Excellence Award.

Françoise Wolfsohn lives and works in Vancouver, but, as she puts it, "I've travelled a lot in my life." When asked about her recent trip to Kumarakom, she sighs, "This place is really unique." Her voice gets even more animated as she describes how her bungalow's bathroom had "ceiling-free" construction. Getting ready for bed is a whole new experience when there's nothing but blue-black skies studded with stars above your head. She adds, "I loved stepping right into the river-like pool from the front door of my bungalow."

Wolfsohn emphasizes how she's stayed in other supposedly five-star hotels in India but found nowhere as spotlessly clean as her experience with Kumarakom. But it's not just the cleanliness she loved. "At night you dine on fabulous food, while local dancers entertain you. The way they move their heads, eyes, and bodies was incredibly special and different."

The Kerala area of India is famous for yoga and Ayurvedic medicine, which has been practised in India for over 2,000 years. The Sanskrit word, Ayurveda, means "laws of health" and is one of the four Vedas or Hindu sacred texts. It has been modified and influenced through contact of foreign systems but has largely remained true to its foundations. An Ayurvedic practitioner's purpose is to balance the psychological, physical, and spiritual attributes of patients, treating them as holistic entities. The resort provides treatments and assessments at the Ayurvedic spa called Ayurmana. Two of Kerala's Ayurvedic doctors and a team of masseurs rejuvenate guests with their ancient methods.

Between the treatments, the hypnotic blue-green watery landscape, warm breezes, and gracious gardens, you should find yourself pretty relaxed. If this place doesn't improve your serenity level, probably nothing will.

—COLLEEN FRIESEN