

Rustic Luxury in Kerala, India

There is something quite special about arriving at a resort in a small canopied boat, an arrival made all the more intriguing when it includes a 15-minute ride along the palm-lined natural canals that parallel Kerala's coastline facing the Arabian Sea. There to greet me at the dock of the Poovar Island Resort (poovarislandresort.com) was my assigned Guest Relation Executive ready to dispatch bags to my room and guide me up the winding pathway to the elegant open-air reception area. "Here is my card," he said once I checked in, "If you have any questions or want me to organize anything for you, just call my mobile." I'm off to a good start!



The priority of the moment was lunch on the up-hill side of an inviting, geometrically-designed swimming pool. Lunch table choices were indoors with air conditioning or outdoors on a three-sided veranda where most resort guests seemed comfortable to eat despite the 30+ degree C temperatures on a February afternoon. The buffet offered three walls of international and Indian dishes, including a dazzling dessert selection that kept grabbing my attention despite my best efforts to focus on the soups, salads and main dishes.

Having booked on short notice, all that was available at the resort was a standard land room in a two-storey cottage (two rooms up/two down), but I was curious during my stay to see what other accommodation options I had missed. Happily, the Chief Executive Officer of the Resort, R. Sritharan ("call me Sri"), took me on a walking tour of the property during which we peeked into one of 16 romantically-isolated Floating Cottages moored along the waterfront, and the Premium Land Cottages, where I was able to identify true luxury at this seaside resort. For my money, I would choose one of the eight Premium Land suites (four per two-storey cottage), newest in the resort's collection of accommodation options, and bristling with amenities that define luxury.



My time with Sri allowed him to share his vision for transforming every element of the resort into a model

eco-friendly stay. In what is a challenging inaccessible property, these initiatives are well under way with promise of more steps to be taken over the next couple of years.

Also with environmental impact in mind, the resort recommends patronizing backwater tour operators who pole their long wooden fishing canoes (standing like Venetian gondoliers) around a magical watery landscape for early morning birding expeditions, botanical explorations and a memorable sunset cruise. Not only is this kinder to the shoreline and passers-by than boats with engines that make waves and erode banks, but also less intrusive for close-up glimpses of wildlife amidst the tranquil backwaters.

Upon arrival, I had noticed a cream-colored sandbar about five minutes by boat over to the canal shoreline opposite the resort. “Any time you want to cross to the public beach, just walk down to the dock and one of our boat drivers will take you to the Arabian Sea,” my Guest Relations Executive had said.



But the caution was instant and urgent, “You cannot swim there, the currents and waves are too dangerous!” Neither was swimming in the canals encouraged, again because the currents are very unpredictable. I did stroll along the sandbar to witness another memorable sunset, but the steep sandy drop-off made the reason for the caution all too obvious.

One of the reasons I had selected this seaside resort was to learn about its Ayurveda Village, a separate 15-room element of the resort property with two Ayurvedic doctors, 13 treatment rooms, numerous massage practitioners, its own Ayurvedic restaurant heavy on fruits and vegetables, and a serious commitment to curing or relieving health problems such as joint pain, obesity and chronic stress. Minimum check-in is one week for rest and relaxation clients with no medical agenda, two weeks for clients with medical challenges. Having only three days to spend at the resort, I was still able to book an Ayurveda massage treatment, accessed with a five minute walk along wooden boardwalks on stilts over the water and through manicured Ayurveda Village gardens.



Owned by Aitken Spence Hotels & Resorts with properties in Sri Lanka, India, Maldives and Oman, Poovar Island Resort's chief international clientele in more than a decade of operation has been European, especially when it comes to the Ayurveda Village. To health-oriented Germans, Swiss and Swedes, two or three weeks of focus on retaining or regaining a healthy life balance in such a beautiful, undistracted setting is motivation enough.

Many British retirees come for a month or two annually to escape the worst of winter in the UK. And, of course, the Indian middle class, now 350 million strong across the country, is becoming an increasingly important resort market, particularly in the shoulder seasons. November through February is high season.

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