

BEACH DESTINATION

DAYS BY the Sea

At the recently renovated Surya Samudra resort at Kovalam, enjoy moments of solitude and leisure as you explore Kerala's famed beach destination. **BY NISHAT FATIMA**



AYURVEDA, YOGA, BEACHES reads a roadside hoarding neatly encapsulating every tourist's expectation of Kerala. I also ruefully recognise it as my itinerary for the weekend, but I can't feel the slightest inclination to do something about being part of the cliché. In fact, if the board included backwaters and spice plantations, I would be happy to do them too.

Once the summer retreat of the Maharaja of Travancore, Kovalam is my destination. Its beaches lay deserted till the hippies discovered it in the 70s, but it was in 1995, with the start of chartered flights, that it burst into prominence.

It's the first time I've been so far south; Kanyakumari, passing signposts reveal, is just a few hours away. Signs of the city are quick to fall away and within minutes the pervasive air of leisure settles like

a balm. My first surprise comes when I catch a glimpse of the sea while our road begins to climb and dip. This, I discover, is what makes Kovalam's coastline so interesting—green-clad cliffs that drop down to rocks which segue into beaches. The second happens when I find the car turning into a bylane of what is obviously a village. This is home to Surya Samudra Private Retreats, which is not as I thought, around the corner from Kovalam, but a 15 minute drive away.

Surya Samudra began life in private hands, home to Klaus Schleusener, a German professor, who built an octagonal cabin on a rocky promontory midway between two crescent-shaped beaches. He then started to buy traditional, wooden *tharavadu* houses (typical Kerala houses with inner courtyards) that were being pulled down and put them back up on his 22 acre-estate. Soon it became the premier resort on this stretch of the coast, famous for being open to the elements.

Of course things changed. A little over a year ago, Surya Samudra was renovated. Air conditioning was added as well as a plush new suite, a reception and two new restaurants. The spa (Niraamaya) was upgraded, the pool upped to infinity status and a deck added. Soon there will be a conference hall with suites attached. It is said that the best renovations are invisible and that is the way it is

HOT DEAL

KERALA HOLIDAY
Stay at Surya Samudra at ₹11,000 onwards per night (double occupancy) with breakfast, evening snacks and a 10-minute foot treatment.

1. The beautifully appointed Niraamaya Spa
2. A welcoming sitting space outside one of the rooms at the resort





DAY TRIP OPTION FROM KOVALAM

Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of the country, is a great place to spend a day. It is 90 km from Kovalam and will take you about two hours to reach. This is the place where the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean meet. Watch the sunset from the beach at Vivekanandapuram. This can be a great addition to your vacation at Kovalam.

here. Amidst the ubiquitous greenery a path slopes down to the rooms set across multiple levels, bound together by the all-day-dining restaurant, Oottupura, and the pool. To the right is the beach, accessed from the resort by steps cut into the side of the cliff. In the distance is an oil rig and further on a mosque. All the rest is the Arabian Sea, loudly booming as it breaks against the shore, constantly blowing in a cooling breeze.

This is my view from The Octagon. I am staying at the resort's first building, and the two armchairs on the sit-out in front tempt me to never move unless it's to the chairs inside when the sun is overhead.

But it is the one thing I can't do. Blame it on 'Ayurveda, yoga, beaches'. Also the leisurely lunches, that are the work of Chef Prakash, formerly of Olive, Mumbai. He's a dab hand with the European, while his version of Kerala cuisine retains all the flavour, but tones down the coconut and chilli.

Every time I rise from a heavenly meal, it's to do something. First I head off to Vizhinjam and Kovalam. Vizhinjam is a nearby fishing village, home to the mosque on the horizon. Later at night, the fishermen will set out to sea and return with their catch early in the morning. It's not as picturesque as it might have been—work on building a port is in progress. But I'm wryly informed that it's been in the works for at least a decade.

Kovalam is ten minutes away, its approach signposted by clumps of tourists. Still nothing prepares me for the main beaches. Hawah and Lighthouse Beach (I don't have time to see the third crescent of Kovalam Beach) are a concentrated promenade of shops, restaurants and hotels. Fresh seafood is displayed at restaurants; Fusion, which looks a step up from the rest, I am told is the best restaurant there. Most tourists are foreigners; some do *surya namaskar* on the beach, some sunbathe, while others enjoy a beer as they watch the sun go down.

It's a relief to get back to the splendid solitude of Surya Samudra, where the only lights on the horizon are those from the fishing boats of fishermen. It seems appropriate that I'm having their catch for dinner—grilled seer fish, king fish, prawns and squid, courtesy the resort's second restaurant Kanal.

Early morning finds me under the sky on the yoga pavilion. It's the most unhurried session of yoga I have ever experienced and I finally understand why people find it an almost mystical experience. But my day's barely begun. Next is Padmanabhapuram Palace, home to the Rajas of Travancore. This magnificent 17th century

1. The sea-facing restaurant Kanal that serves fresh grilled seafood
2. The subtly-lit pool close to Octagon building
3. Colourful fishing boats at the Arabian Sea
4. Open garden bathrooms come with most cottages
5. The all-day dining, multi-cuisine restaurant, Oottupura

structure is made almost entirely of wood. The Kerala style architecture means low walls topped with high sloping roofs, cool, polished floors made of everything from egg white to coconut shell. Walls are made of teak lattice work and the ceilings carved. This tour is made barefoot.

The rest of my stay is devoted to ayurveda. Since I'm at the resort for too short a time to benefit from the regime (diet, exercise and massage), I make do only with massage (I am not complaining). First in line is Abhyangasana, an invigorating full body massage with hot oil, followed by Shirodhara and Patra Pinda Swedana, a warm compress bracingly thumped on my right arm to relieve my golfer's elbow. The next is a signature massage of the resort, Spice Magic, a mix of western and ayurveda massage techniques. I am sent back to my cottage with instructions to let the oils seep in, and I intend to sit out and stare out at the Arabian Sea. A look at my watch and the plan is scuppered; I have only enough time to pack before I'm on the road again. It seems almost as though my weekend has run according to the hoarding. I wonder if my trip back will also benefit from another one I have just seen that says, 'Garden Fresh Toddy'.

AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE

Fly direct to Thiruvananthapuram from major metros, Kovalam is 40 minutes by road. Fare: ₹12,000 (approx)

WHEN TO GO

April, May and June can be very hot. The monsoons are spectacular, and the climate is cool for the rest of the year.

MUST DO

STAY

Surya Samudra Private Retreats, Pulinkudi. This luxury resort is perfect for a soul stay with a divine mix of the old and new. Tel: (0471) 226 7333; www.suryasamudra.com; Cost: ₹14,000 to 45,800 per night.

EAT

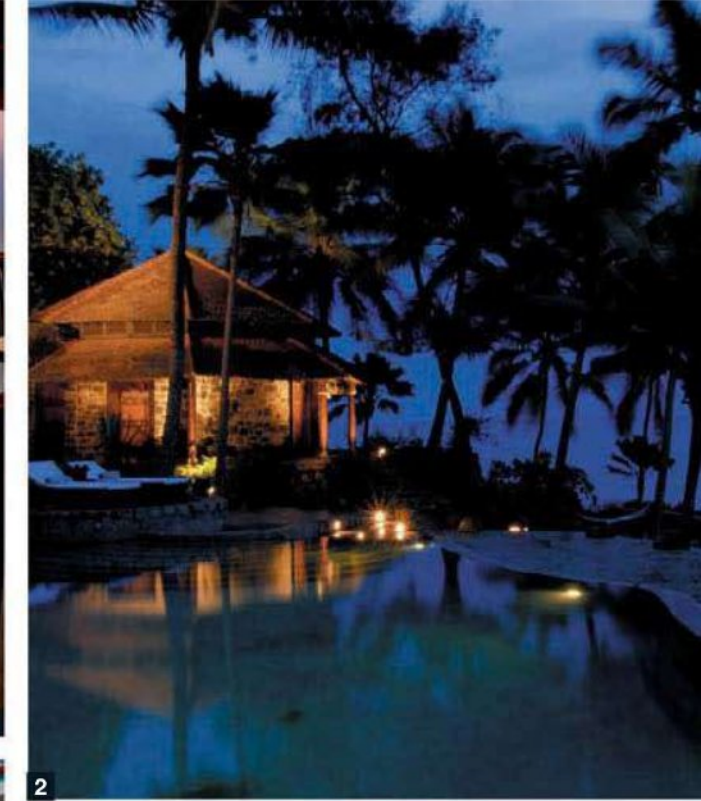
Seafood: The catch is fresh, the variety wide, the seasoning ranging from mild to fiery. Vegetarians can mop up their stew with appams.

SHOP

Pick up spices like cardamom, pepper, dried chilli, cloves, turmeric and saffron.

SEE

Padmanabhapuram Palace, a window to the splendid past of the region.



3 & 5 PHOTOGRAPHS BY NISHAT FATIMA/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM