

Rising with the Tide

Once the hotbed of pre-Independence revolutions, the languid backwaters of **Vayalar, Kerala** are fast emerging as an unconventional destination of choice among leisure travellers seeking tranquility in 'God's own country'. *By Shikha Pushpan*

EVOCATIVE MURALS, TALL LAMP stands, glittering elephant caparisons, and striking replicas of *Theyyam* artistes recreate the euphoric ambience of Kerala's temple festivals as one walks through the airy reception area of Vasundhara Sarovar Premiere, Vayalar—my base for two days. Set against the lucid backwaters of Lake Vembanad, the resort captures the village's easy, laid-back vibe through its fuss-free spaces and old-fashioned hospitality. I check into my lake-facing suite and spend the next 48 hours waking up to birdsong, admiring the quietude of village life, and going into a sensory overdrive thanks to the abundance of greenery around.

Not far from its more popular cousin, Kumarakom, Vayalar is relatively new on the block and an emerging destination cashing in on the

state's backwaters tourism with its virgin landscapes and wellness-centric approach to leisure travel. As I would later discover, Vayalar is also home to numerous unsung heroes of India's multi-layered history. The unassuming surrounds of the Raktha Sakshi Mandapam sends chills down my spine when I learn about the gory execution of hundreds of peasants and coir workers by the then British-backed state of Travancore in 1946. The place has now been converted into a memorial and is open to public for visits. A little further away is Mulachhipuram, or the land of the woman with breasts,



Clockwise from left: An Ayurveda session is recommended when in Vayalar; karimeen fry is the local staple; the spa at Vasundhara Sarovar Premiere, Vayalar. Opposite: A houseboat is the best way to explore the backwaters.



where Nangeli, a lower-caste woman is believed to have lived. Quite ironic to Kerala's stature as the most literate state in the country, I learn about the audacious caste system and some of the worst taxes imposed in the erstwhile Travancore kingdom. Interestingly, besides the tax on land and crops, people of the lower castes were required to pay taxes for the right to wear jewellery, the right to grow a moustache, and even the right of women to cover their breasts. Local legend has that Nangeli chopped off her breasts when a tax-collector visited her house in Cherthala to collect breast tax. While Nangeli bled to death at her doorstep, her husband is believed to have jumped into the pyre to end his life—this is among the first accounts of a man committing sati in India. Two hundred years on, while Nangeli's sacrifice is a fading memory, Vayalar is once again getting the attention it deserves—for the right reasons. Back at the resort, my evening is spent soaking in the sunset from the jacuzzi on the resort's private houseboat as we traverse unnamed islands on Lake Vembanad and sail past local toddy shops and giant fishing nets on the backwaters. From the deck, I reach out to pluck a fruit

THE DETAILS
GETTING THERE Vayalar is located in the Alappuzha district of Kerala. It is situated 60 kilometres from Cochin International Airport. Ask the hotel concierge to arrange a pickup from the airport or book a prepaid taxi.
STAY Vasundhara Sarovar Premiere, Vayalar offers a range of rooms, suites, and cottages. Its private houseboat is also available for booking if you'd like to spend the night on the backwaters or take a tour during mornings or evenings. Starts from ₹7,000 + taxes; sarovarhotels.com
EXPERIENCES Ayurvedic healing is at the heart of the wellness treatments offered at Vasundhara Sarovar Premiere, Vayalar. Consult the in-house Ayurvedic doctor to choose a suitable therapy for your body type—vata, pitta, and kapha. Navarakizhi and Abhyangam therapies come recommended for leisure travellers.



from one of the dangling branches of what looked like a mango tree. But I'm cautioned against it. This, I am told, is the 'suicide tree' or *corbura odallam* which releases a toxin that blocks the calcium ion channels in the heart muscles, causing cardiac arrest, and often leading to death! Visibly shaken by my gaffe, I settle down to savour the traditional *sadhya* served on a large banana leaf. While *ellisheri*, *pulisseri*, *kaalan*, and *olan* remind me of the grand feast prepared at home during Onam, *karimeen fry* is easily my biggest takeaway from the experience.

Vayalar is the place to visit with zero #travelgoals and return home with an overjoyed sense of a holiday done just right! ✕