

DISPATCHES FROM INDIA & SRI LANKA

John Freeman, our India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia specialist has recently returned from a journey to the subcontinent to visit some new areas and properties for inclusion in our itineraries for 2002 and beyond. Here John recounts some of his most memorable moments from the journey...



RAJASTHANI MUSICIANS NEAR PUSHKAR

RURAL RAJASTHAN, INDIA

Rajasthan is well known for its palaces and forts, but less so for its countryside. A large part of it is desert, however southern Rajasthan is more lush. One of my real finds was Rawla Narlai, an 18th century royal hunting retreat converted into a heritage hotel, at the edge of a small village in the shadow of a stupendous 350 foot high single rock granite hill. It is an oasis of calm after the hectic Rajasthani cities. It lies between Jodhpur and Udaipur and is about 40 minutes from the famous Jain temples of Ranakpur. It is also near to one of the great rural forts of the state at Kumbhalgarh. Using it as a base you can visit these sights and explore the local villages, either by vehicle, foot or on horseback. Heading on to Udaipur via Ranakpur, you pass through the Aravalli hills, where you can still see the land being irrigated by ox powered wheels that lift pots full of water to higher ground and then deposit it into irrigation channels.



SRI LANKA'S SOUTH COAST

THE KERALA BACKWATERS, INDIA

Kerala is famous for its backwaters, a network of canals, rivers, lagoons and lakes. One of the best ways of exploring these is on a traditional rice barge converted into a houseboat. Most have either 1 or 2 double bedrooms. They are basic, but comfortable and each bedroom has an en suite bathroom. Usually there will be a crew of 3, your personal cook and 2 others punting the barge along with bamboo poles. The food I had was excellent. The cook asked me what I wanted for dinner and then went out to buy the ingredients, fish being the local speciality.

Nothing else on my journey could compare with the sunset and sunrise over the water fringed with coconut trees and rice paddies. After waking early, I sat outside watching the magical scene of the world coming to life by the river as it has done for centuries before, people washing their clothes, pots and pans and themselves. I will never forget those scenes.



HOUSEBOAT, ALLEPEY



ELEPHANT ORPHANAGE, SRI LANKA

YALA NATIONAL PARK, SRI LANKA

My travels through Sri Lanka took me to the ancient sites in the cultural triangle, the cooler climate and views of the hill country, then south past beautiful beaches to Yala National Park in the south east.

Situated on the coast it is a mixture of lakes, lagoons, rocky outcrops and scrub. Some of the scenery is spectacular. The animals you are likely to see are wild boar, wild buffaloes, deer (both sambar and spotted), monkeys, peacocks, jungle fowl and many species of birds. There is also a good chance of seeing elephants and crocodiles. If you are lucky you may see sloth bears. There are also leopards in the park, but these are very difficult to see. On one evening drive I saw all of these apart from a leopard. We saw a sloth bear walking up the track and luckily it didn't run away as we approached, to the contrary, it walked right up to the vehicle and proceeded to preen itself and examine us!

I stayed at the Yala Safari Beach Hotel, which is sandwiched between the sea and a beautiful lagoon in the wilderness. As it is just outside the park entrance, there are many birds and animals around and wild elephants sometimes wander by.

For a brochure, more information or to plan a tailor-made journey to India or Sri Lanka call John on **01869 276 218**. Elsewhere in the subcontinent contact Chris Orme for Nepal and Tibet or Kate Russell for Bhutan on the same number.



SOUTH INDIAN VILLAGE GIRLS