

## About the author

Sree Kumar is an essayist and amateur photographer. He was educated in London, Oxford and Singapore, where he now lives.

His essays can be read at [travelessayist.blogspot.com](http://travelessayist.blogspot.com); and his photographs can be seen at [photo.net/photos/sree](http://photo.net/photos/sree)

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## Waiting for the Monsoon

Travels around Trivandrum

Sree Kumar



Waiting for the Monsoon

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## Waiting for the Monsoon

In June 2010, I travelled to Trivandrum to see the monsoon. It did not break while I was there but I made several short trips to temples, churches and fishing villages. This is a record of that travel interspersed with a few others from a previous trip.

Sree Kumar  
June 2010



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## Waiting for the Monsoon

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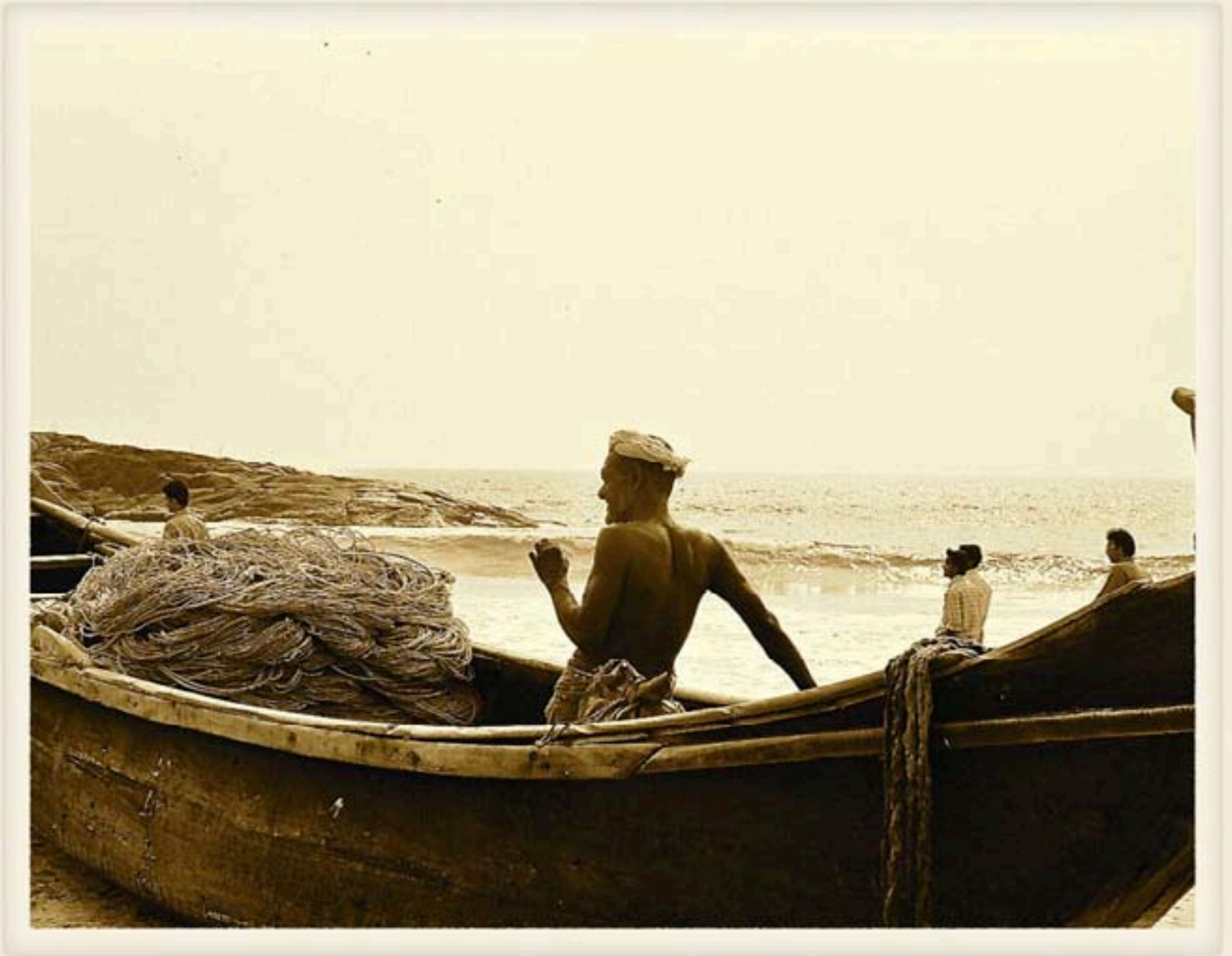
Waiting for the Monsoon



# Waiting for the Monsoon

Dedicated to His Highness  
Sri Uthradom Tirunal Marthanda Varma, Maharaja of Travancore

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Muslim quarter, Vizhinjam









Muslim fishermen's huts, frying sardines, and mosque, Vizhinjam





Muslim quarter, Vizhinjam



Anchovies, Muslim quarter, Vizhinjam



Fishing nets, Muslim quarter, Vizhinjam





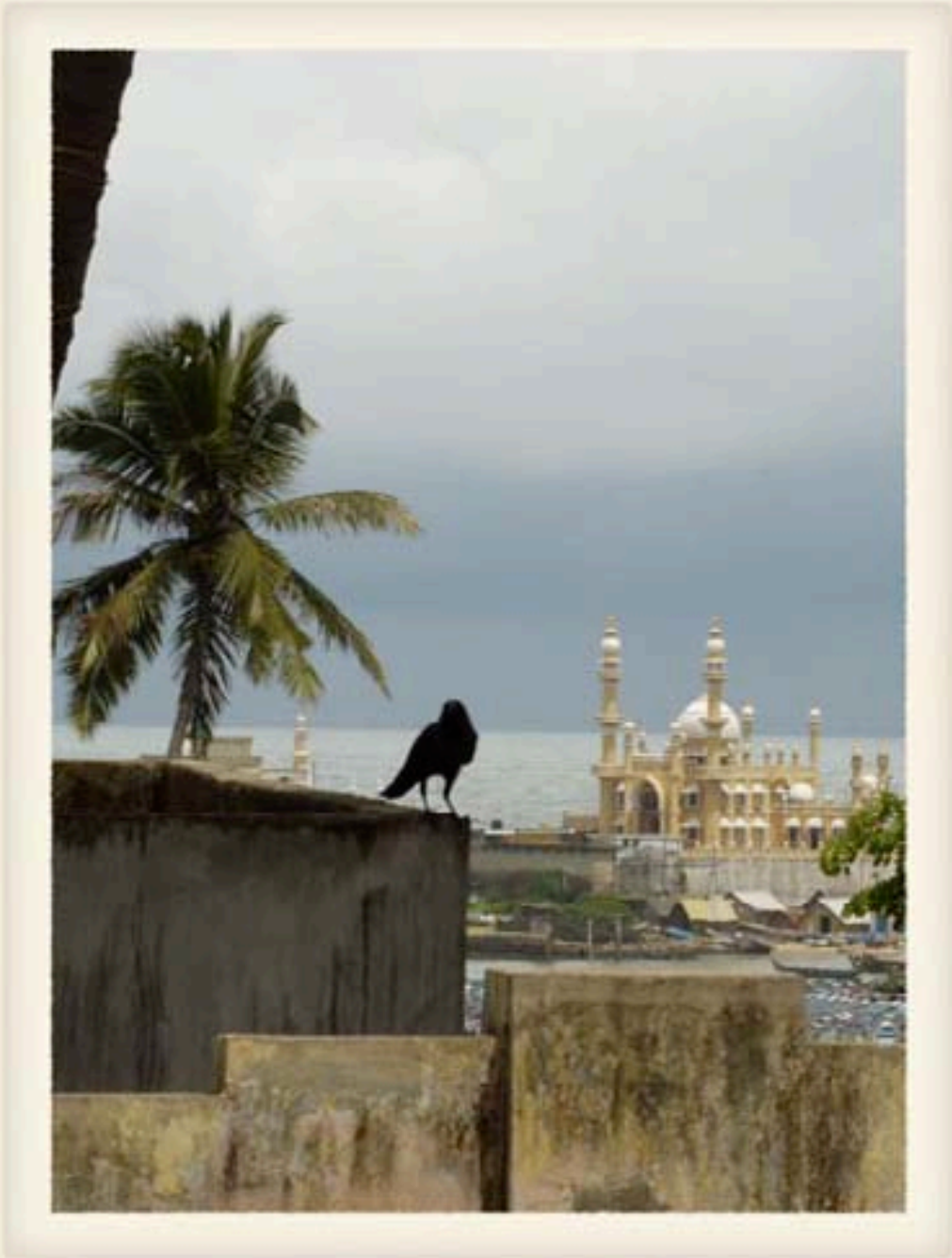


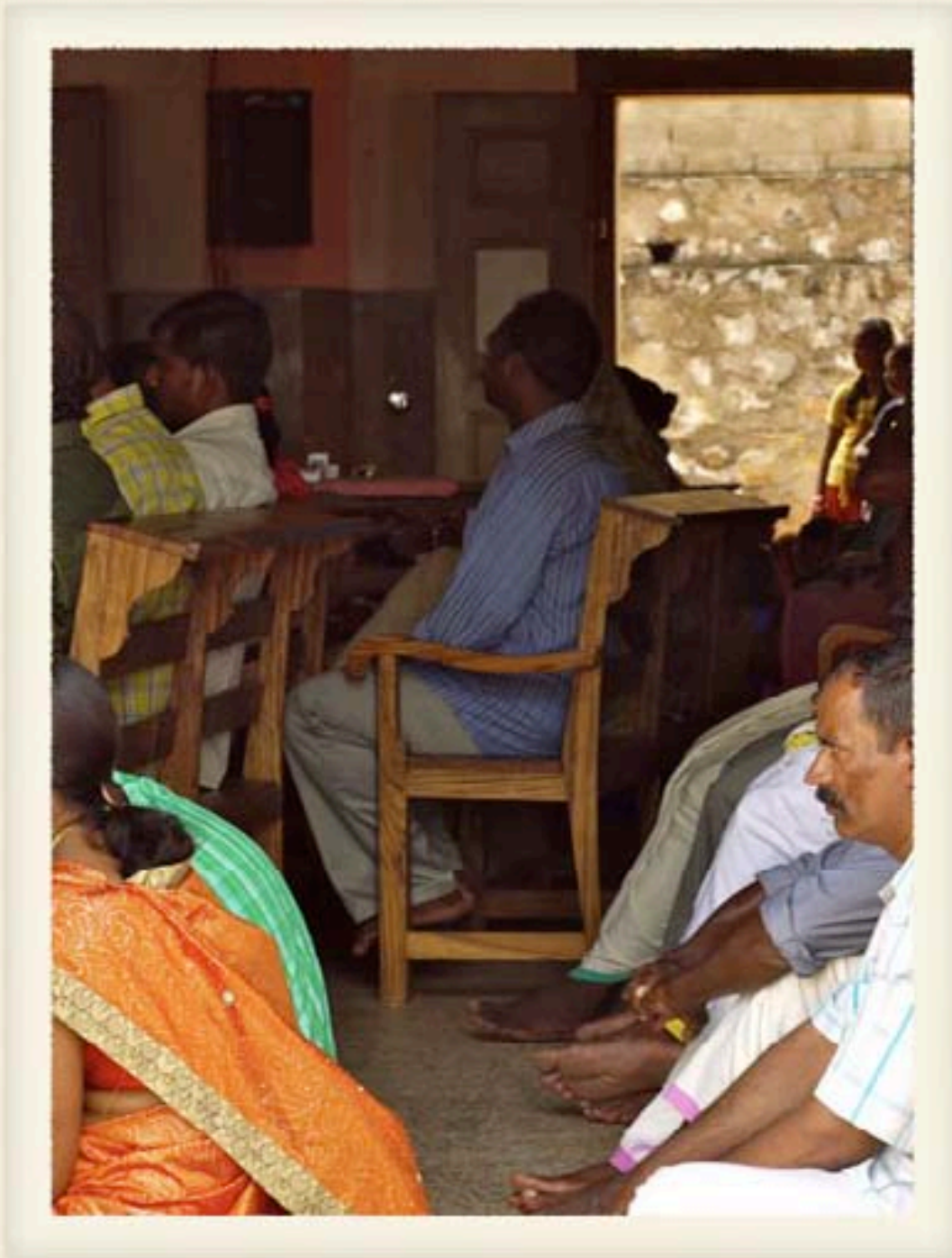




Bringing in the net, Vizhinjam

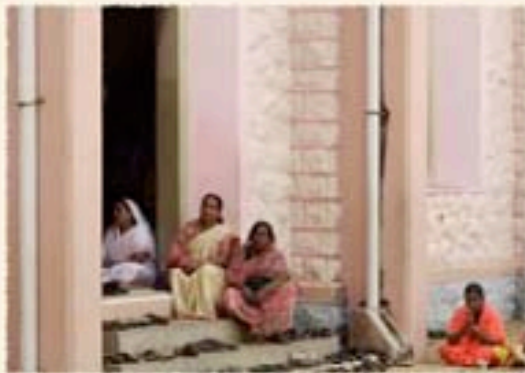








View of the mosque from the Church; Children at church service; Vizhinjam











Kovalam, Waiting for the Monsoon









Poonthara, breakwaters





Ammaveedu, Trivandrum, top; Ganapathy Temple, East Fort, below



Ganapathy Temple, East Fort



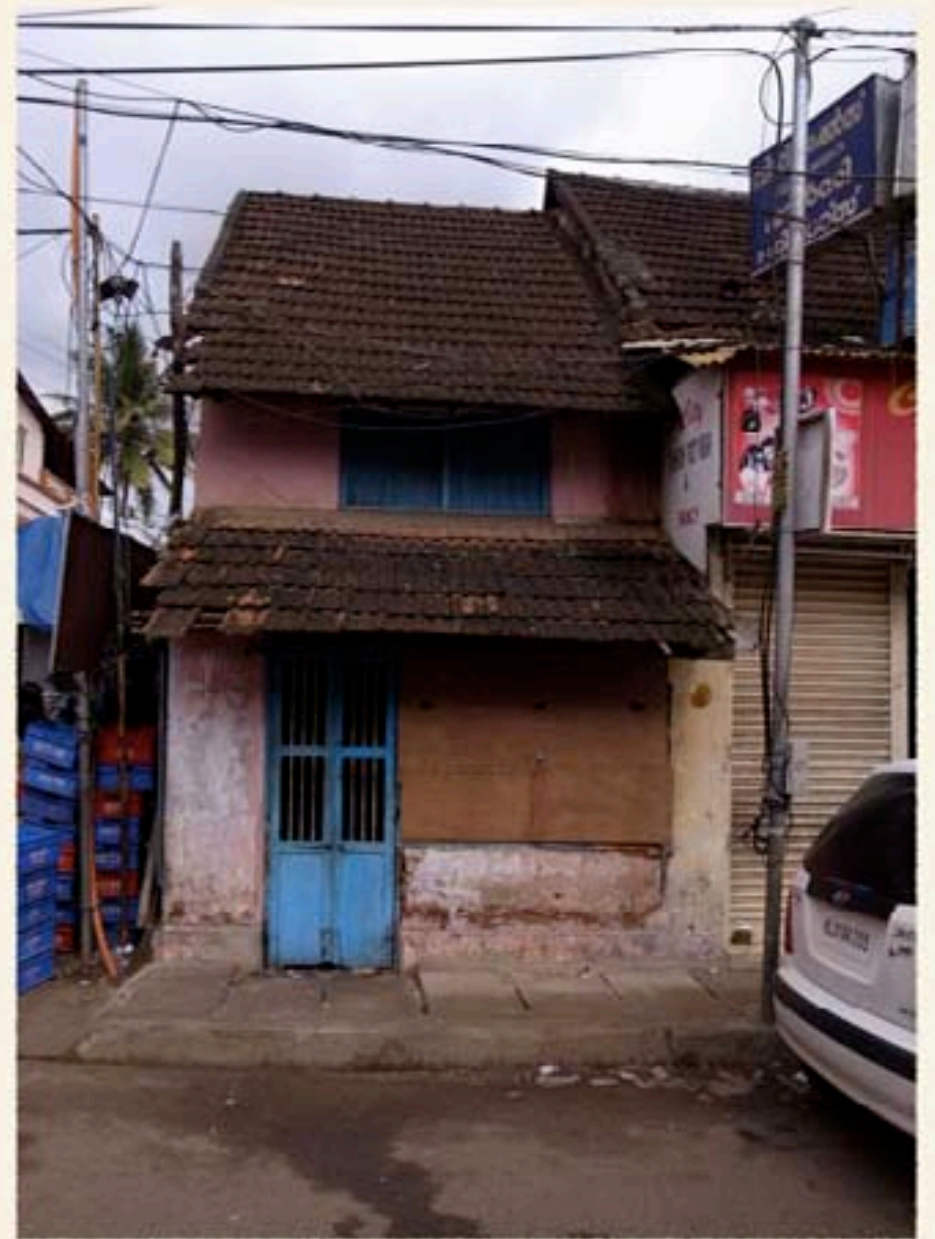


Outside Ganapathy Temple, East Fort











East Fort views; Clock Tower

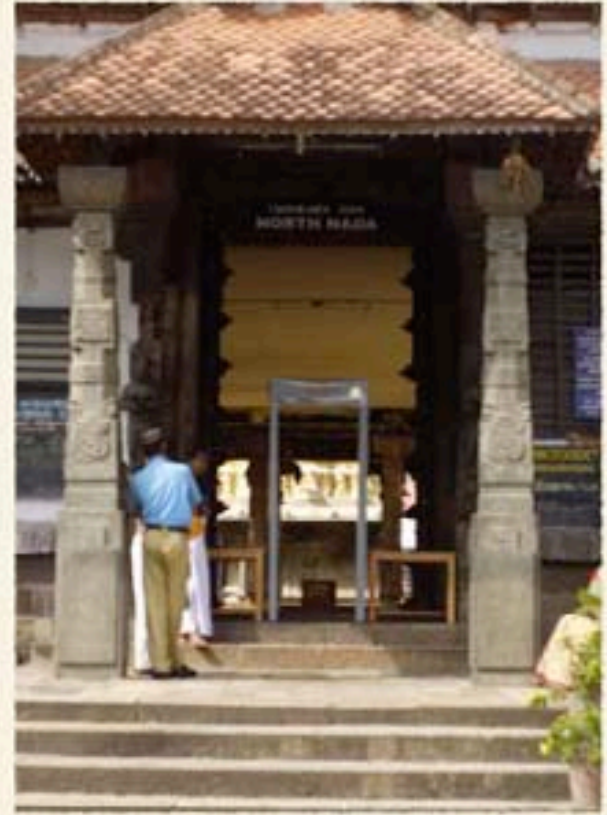
Sunday Holiday

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Street views, Trivandrum





Waves at Shankhumukham







Fisherman, Shankumukham









Outside Mannarsala Snake Temple







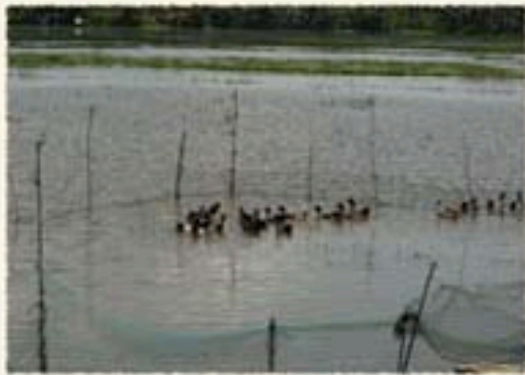












Rice fields, Haripad





Edathuapalli







Edathuapalli Backwaters; Quilon, bottom right



















Thekkumpagam, Paravur Backwaters









Theyyam costume; Rope dance; Ottan Thullal





Sri Chitra Thirunal Art Gallery, top; Kuthira Malika Palace, bottom left







Views of Kuthira Malika Palace









Brahmin quarter, East Fort



M.S.  
and Science  
ANKERS  
in line of  
and Science  
with the  
of Science









Brahmin houses, Trivandrum



Handwritten graffiti in blue ink above an archway.

Men's  
AN EXCLUSIVE READYMADE



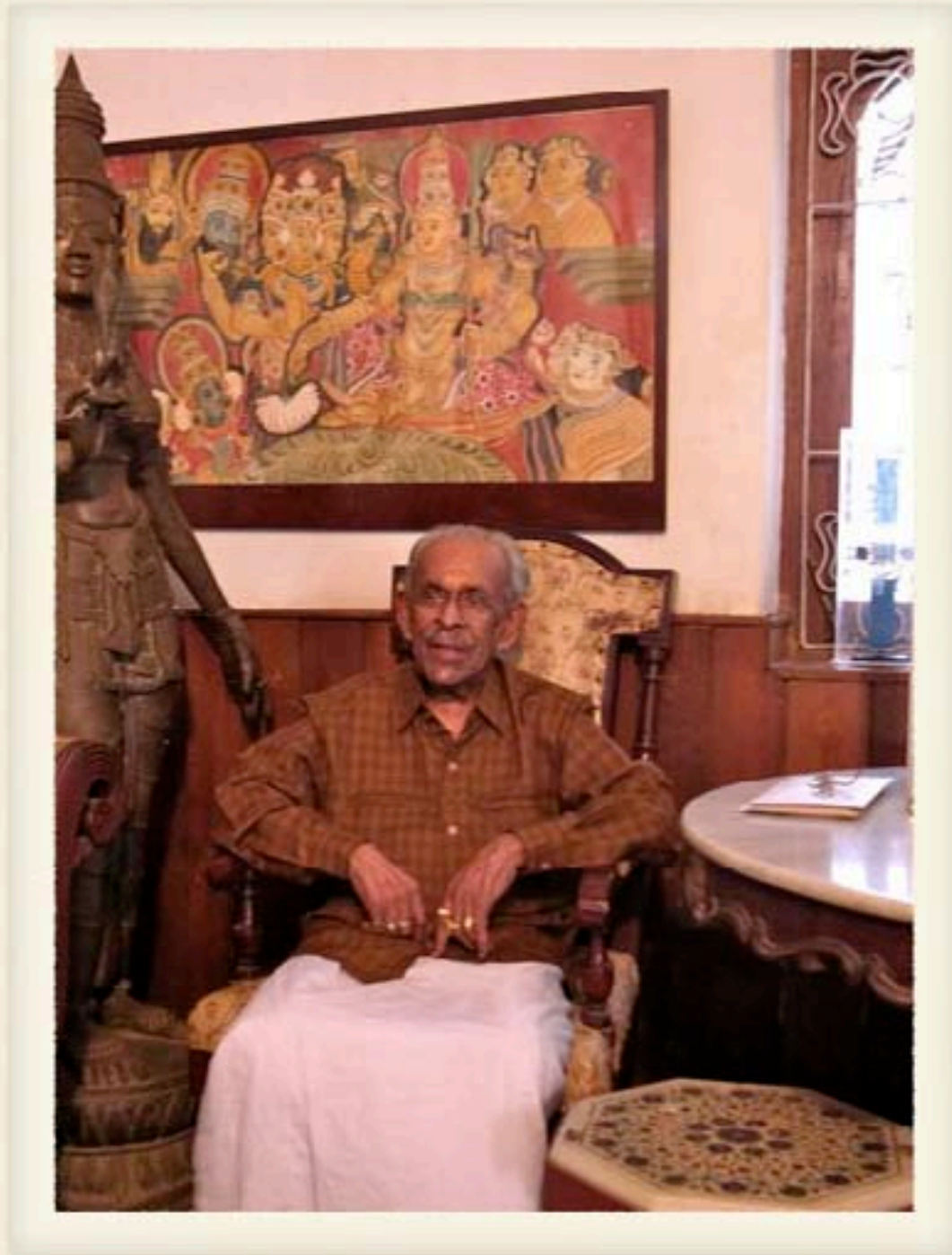
Women  
AN EXCLUSIVE READYMADE

GENT'S WEAR LADIES' WEAR

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His Highness, The Maharaja of Travancore, Pattom Palace





## Waiting for the Monsoon

In India the monsoon makes landfall in Kerala, first. It then travels across the subcontinent and brings water to a thirsting land. There is a precision as to when it will arrive. Meteorologists play god in announcing its arrival with a confidence seldom seen in the other sciences.

It had been raining when we landed in Trivandrum, late in the evening. I thought the monsoon had already broken but was told otherwise by the airport staff. The airport looked drenched. Our driver held a placard with my name at the arrivals gate. We got into an old Ambassador taxi and set off for our hotel. The taxi lurched from one edge of the road to the other, missing potholes along the way. In the dark it was difficult to make out the street signs or the shops. Everything closes earlier in Trivandrum: it is more of an administrative than a commercial city.

In Vizhinjam the seas had been rough for most of the week. This fishing village has mostly Christians and Muslims, living around a bay. There was very little catch to show. On the Muslim side there were two large mosques standing side by side. In their shadow, standing on the beach, were thatched huts. Colourful boats lay moored in the bay, in anticipation of the coming monsoon. After a week of nothing to show, a few boxes of anchovies were now being offloaded. A woman, her head covered in a white turban, put out anchovies to dry on the parapet of a wall and then strung a net over them to keep out the crows. She explained how the dried anchovies would be used to make a curried paste which would be fried and eaten with boiled rice during the monsoon when there could be little or no fishing. Meanwhile out on the beach men were busy reeling in their empty nets.

Over on the Christian side the Church was full, this being a Sunday. The sermon spoke of returning safe from the sea and of the bounty of God. There were women sitting on the sand outside, listening to the sermon being blasted out of the loudspeakers. Two little girls, dressed in their Sunday best, sat on the steps, oblivious to the goings on. Many older men and women thronged the pews; every seat was taken. Then, as the sermon ended, a beautiful baritone voice accompanied by an equally powerful female nightingale broke into Malayalam Christian song. The music and the song were overpowering. The secret of the success of the Church was obvious.

Out on the street, meanwhile, there was already a queue at the local liquor shop. It had not opened yet. When mass was over, most of the male congregation would descend on it and make merry. Kerala's liquor consumption is legendary, and this Christian side of Vizhinjam can attest to it. So here, in the different halves of this town, the Christian desire for liquor coexists with the abstinence practised by the Muslims. It is a wonder whether communities from either side have gone to see what the other has, or whether the only meeting ground is out at sea where the waves are neutral.

Soon the clouds gathered out at sea. The sky turned dark grey and the sea became choppy, with the waves lashing the breakwaters. The wind rose and swept through the coconut fronds, bending the leaves and trees. There were small droplets being washed ashore but there was no downpour. The rain appeared as a grey sheet, far out at sea. The howling wind soon died down and the clouds and the grey sheet moved away to the south. The monsoon was not ready to hit the shore. It would be a few more days before it broke.

The beach at Shankumukham, where the locals take their evening constitutional, slowly filled with people. The seas were rough and the setting sun cast its rays from behind thick clouds. The monsoon had been delayed but the sunset ritual continued to weave its magic. An old fisherman stood at the edge of the beach and said to me as I passed him, “I chew tobacco. Do you have any to give me?” I dug out a ten rupee note from my pocket and handed it to him. Further up the beach were some fishing boats. A few boys were mending fishing nets, sitting on the sand. Meanwhile a steady stream of sunset watchers had queued at the India Coffee House to see the last of the sun’s rays.

We left for Haripad early in the morning, to pray at the snake temple in Mannarsala. Life in the villages and towns was just awakening as we drove along. There were coconut groves stretched along both sides and, then, backwaters. The shifting scenes of coconut groves, jackfruit and banana trees interspersed with glimpses of the backwaters made for a relaxed ride. Occasionally we passed churches and mosques, and small tea stalls where the early morning faithful were gathered.

There were few people when we arrived at the temple. This is a most unusual place of worship in Kerala. The central deities are snakes. The immediate surroundings of the temple are forested and fenced off with netting to keep people away from the snakes that seek refuge here. The temple itself is serene and magical. It is built in the traditional Kerala style with a low wooden roof and a central sanctum. There was an eerie, contemplative, silence inside, only punctuated by the mantras being recited at the altar or by the stanzas being sung by the Pulluva singer standing at the entrance facing the main deity.

The silence, broken by the occasional mantras and stanzas, lent a deep sense of the spiritual within the inner sanctum. Women came to seek help with fertility, and others, to resolve their health concerns. Soon a group had queued next to the Pulluva singer to have him sing stanzas for them.

The Catholic Church at Edathuapalli, founded in 1810, stands on the edge of the backwaters where three rivers meet. It is a strikingly handsome building in a scenic setting. A few devotees were inside, praying at the altar to Mary. Outside the church candles were being burnt in a large metal tray. A small boy stood on the side, trying to blow the flames down. Sometime later, an old man, coughing incessantly, came to clear the melted wax and burnt wicks. In a school alongside the church, a teacher could be heard extolling the virtues of Edathuapalli to a gathering of schoolchildren. The summer term had just begun that day. The smells of pickled prawns and fried fish wafted through the breeze as the sun shone through coconut fronds. The town of Edathua, situated across the backwaters from the church, had meanwhile come alive. Auto rickshaws, bicycles, cars and buses choked the narrow roads. At the main junction we discovered a local sweetshop selling banana and jackfruit chips, *aluva*, sweet sesame balls, flattened rice and other delectables.

In the late afternoon we broke journey at a brand new hotel in Quilon. The sun had become fiercely hot and the street outside was bathed in bright sunlight. Everyone was trying to escape the blazing sun by taking shelter in the five-foot ways of the shops or under black umbrellas. The food in the hotel was delicious, southern Kerala fare. We ate, enjoying every bite while country and western music played through the music system. It was, to say the least, a most unusual setting for such music.

On another day, at the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Trivandrum, we joined a long queue that had formed in the inner sanctum, waiting to clamber up to the main altar to seek favours or to just have a glimpse of the famous deity, Lord Padmanabha. While we waited, we withered in the hot stifling air of the sanctum. When the queue was eventually allowed in, the crowd had begun to push and jostle. Women elbowed men, and men squeezed through the narrowest gaps they could see. Sweat intermingled with sweat as bare-bodied men rubbed against one another trying to get to the front of the crowd. Women in sarees pushed and shoved, some with babies in their arms. The true character of Kerala women and their ability to tame men came to be exhibited in this one fell moment. In front of their devoted deity nothing was more sacred than being in his presence. Having glimpsed the reposing deity, I fled to the inner courtyard where the sun broke through wire netting and the air was fresh. I gasped and gathered myself as I tried to recover from the onslaught of pushing and elbowing that I had gone through only moments earlier.

The Kuthira Malika palace, next to the temple, was built by the philosopher-musician king, Swathi Thirunal, in the 1840s. We entered through the office block. A small group of locals and foreigners had gathered to see the palace. The most celebrated part was the large room with the alcove where Swathi Thirunal sat and wrote his classical compositions while gazing at the *gopuram* of the Padmanabhaswamy temple through the window. It was a surprisingly cool room, with a breeze blowing gently through the gaps in the wooden slats. It is said that he discussed his compositions with his nearest advisers in this room before going to another room, further along a passageway, to discuss them with the Thanjavur Quartet, the four musicians he had invited from Tamilnad.

There is an unusual blend of art, music and architecture in the palace, made all the more real by a king who had a passion for knowledge in all its forms. It was obvious that much of his personality remains entwined in the palace and its walls.

In the late afternoon, in that room with the alcove, there was no one around. The other visitors had trudged away with a guide to a different part of the palace. My friend Sasibhooshan led us along the passageway when we finished admiring the view through the window and the ornate steps of the alcove. My companion followed, while I was far at the back trying to make sense of the symmetry of the corridor. We arrived at the second room and my companion looked at me, ashen white, “Did you tap me on my shoulder while we were in the corridor?” I could not have; I was too far behind her, beyond arm’s length. The palace, obviously, had its secrets.

Heavy clouds continued to ring the city, threatening to bring the heavens down but the monsoon had still not arrived when we left. Nature had outwitted the meteorologists, and not for the first time.

*Sree Kumar*  
*June 2010*





