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TRAVELER

BEST 24 HOURS ON EARTH

**An Around-the-Clock Guide
to Global Adventure**



BEST 24 HOURS ON EARTH

DAY ► NIGHT

AN HOUR-BY-HOUR GUIDE FOR THE TRAVELER WHO NEVER STOPS

Coffee and croissants in Melbourne • Hike a glacier in Argentina • Climb to ancient cave paintings in Namibia • Happy hour in Tokyo • Live music in New York City • Stargaze in the Atacama

READY, SET...

GO!



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The sundials in this issue point to the time of day (or night) for each hourly adventure!

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5 a.m.
Search out a solitary Hawaiian beach as dawn breaks.

9 a.m.
Start with a cup of joe in coffee-loving Melbourne.

Noon
Escape the sun to view ancient cave paintings in Namibia.

6 p.m.
Boat the backwaters of Kerala at dusk.

8 p.m.
Turn the music up: It's New York City at night!





KERALA

Sunset in India sets off a series of rituals **BY GEORGE W. STONE**

On Kakkathuruthu, a tiny island in Kerala's tangled backwaters, children leap into shallow pools. Women in saris head home in skiffs. Fishermen light lamps and cast nets into the lagoon. Bats swoop across the horizon snapping up moths, and the emerald-fringed "island of crows"—the English translation of the Malayalam name for this sandy spot along the Malabar Coast—embraces night.

I'm in the prow of a fishing boat piloted by a Hindu man wearing a pressed Oxford shirt and a creased dhoti. He moves methodically, expertly paddling and occasionally standing to punt with a bamboo pole. Around me, flotillas of water hyacinths, their purple flowers catching the last light, drift atop Vembanad Lake, coalescing into temporary islands before shifting currents carry them away to the rivers that eventually flow through deltas into the Indian Ocean.

Three friends have joined me on this cruise. We arrived by motorboat at our island cottage a day after Christmas, on our way from the tea highlands of Munnar to the ancient city of Kochi, which was for centuries the heart of the Indian spice trade. Regional cuisine celebrates this heritage in piquant curries made with cinnamon, mustard seed, and grated coconut, served on banana leaves lined with tangy chutneys. By request, our Keralan breakfast includes a glass of toddy, which we saw being collected by the local toddy tapper, a sinewy man who shimmies up palm trees to extract the sap that becomes palm wine. When fresh, this cloudy drink offers a sweetly

soporific effect—nap juice of the highest order—enough to send us all snoozing until sundown. We awake just in time to pile into our dugout and ply the lagoon.

In Kerala the waters give life, but life flourishes on land. Seen from the lagoon, the world presents itself as a pantomime, vivid but remote. Boys drag their goats from one grassy knoll to the next. Girls bicycle along dirt paths beside the lagoon. Rattan houseboats freighted with tourists pass by quietly (though not as quietly as they did before air-conditioning). Birds dart across the sky, ducking and diving among reeds, catching dragonflies on the fly. As twilight turns to dusk, a shirtless man lifts a weir to change the flow of water into his shrimp bed. Village temples pipe devotional music through loudspeakers, casting Hindu sound waves across Vembanad Lake in a nightly mash-up with a muezzin's call to prayer. The water's surface reflects pink-gold billows of cloud and stoic palm trees that seem to have sprung from *The Lorax*.

"The perfume of Kerala is woodsmoke," says my friend Ali Potia, who grew up in Mumbai, more than a thousand miles north. "The nightly ritual of dusk involves hearths being lit, women cooking, and men going to the toddy shop." I have pressed Potia into service as cultural interpreter on this voyage, a task he has undertaken with aplomb.

Kerala, he tells me, is an anomaly in India—and the world. This small, traditionally matrilineal state has a high literacy rate; a low birthrate; vibrant and vociferous cultural, intellectual and political traditions; and a Marxist ruling party. Campaign posters typically feature a hammer and sickle beside female candidates wearing printed saris.

Our boat glides onward. The "land of coconuts" is aptly named. After a few scenic eddies, our captain steers us straight to the toddy shop, where the same coconut-palm sap that lulled us to sleep in the morning has fermented in the heat and built up a knockout blow. How many trees must a toddy tapper tap to tease out the sap that entwines our minds? We ask, but no one remembers. All we know is that the toddy tappers in Kerala are busy men, indeed.

Skimming the lake gives the feeling of floating above the world, a feeling reinforced by our inverted reflection in the water. I've somehow switched roles with our pilot, who sits serenely at the bow of the boat while I paddle back to our cottage. A chorus of bullfrogs has drowned out the temple tunes, lotus flowers have closed, and our glowing passage into the gloaming has concluded. Dusk gradually blots out the light in the sky so that all that remains are shades of cobalt and a few scattered, emerging stars. By the time we reach the dock, candles are lit to welcome us home. We stumble ashore. This is how the day ends on Kakkathuruthu: our path illuminated, our spirits roused to the promise of night.

GO WITH NAT GEO

National Geographic Journeys' "South India: Explore Kerala" itinerary paddles the backwaters. Visit natgeojourneys.com.

Dusk is Traveler Editor in Chief **GEORGE W. STONE's** favorite time of day. Follow him: [@travelerstone](https://twitter.com/travelerstone).