



Kerala's backwaters, beaches and swaying coconut trees make the scenic state a popular tourist destination.

## A Rainy Afternoon



The keyhole shaped Bekal Fort in Kerala is a 17th century fort by the sea.

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It was a typical monsoon morning in northern Kerala. Rain was bucketing down, the way it does in this part of the world. A couple of nuns hung on to their black umbrellas, which seemed to have found a spirit of rebellion in the fierce sea breeze. A group of giggling school children on excursion sought shelter under a rusted tin roof, the two teachers no match for their exuberance. A few families were out for that day, the business of sightseeing not to be taken lightly.

Other than my husband and I, all locals.

That day, at Bekal fort, the only sounds were those of the angry sea. The primary colour was brown, not the lush greens and blues of a state familiar to the world from all the tourism posters. Sure, this part of Kerala ticks all the usual boxes: the beaches, the backwaters and the swaying coconut trees. But the highlight is this 17<sup>th</sup> century fort by the sea.

At first glance, Bekal fort seems a bit unassuming. It sits tired and lonely at the edge of the Arabian Sea. But there was a soothing rhythm to the waves washing over its walls, the way they have done for over three centuries now. And there was a majesty about the way it stood, stoically weathering the torrential rains of August and the torrid heat of May.

This fort shaped like a giant keyhole, sprawls over 40 acres. As we climbed up the steep ramp, a local latched on to us to point out its interesting defence features. I particularly

liked the cunningly placed windows in its walls, targeted at different points and distances: the holes at the top meant for aiming far into the ocean while the ones below were designed to catch invaders as they approach closer. Take that, you foe.

There are also some tunnels leading to the sea but the ASI has sealed them off to visitors. As the rain stopped, there was a cool breeze, perfect weather to stand on the central tower of the fort and take in the vistas of the sea and the neighbouring town of Kasargod. Soon, a few brave fishing boats began to make their way into the choppy waters.

I was expecting lots of tourists, mobile phones and cameras but there was none of it. It was surprising as almost two decades ago director Mani Ratnam put this fort on the tourism map with his shots of two lovers torn apart by a hostile world. After his movie 'Bombay', the rain-drenched ramparts of Bekal had suddenly become the most romantic rendezvous in south India. And in the last few years, two luxury hotels had also opened their doors close to the fort.

Perhaps, I was just lucky or perhaps the rain kept the crowds away. Either way, I walked away feeling like I had discovered something special.

*Charukesi Ramadurai's blog Itchy Feet has travels from 22 countries and 22 Indian states.*

INDIAPICTURE. OPPOSITE: YASHAS CHANDRA

# Indelible India

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