

At the time of writing it is a wet and windy March Sunday morning in London. Only the most dedicated of dog walkers can be seen crossing the common outside my window pulling their faithful, yet reticent, charges further away from the comfort of their baskets and blankets by the Aga. It is a far, far cry from my birthday two Sundays ago which was spent idly drifting across one of the most spectacular waterscapes I have ever seen; the Keralan waterways. I know it must have happened, I have the tan to prove it, but it seems so far away now. I click on the image file on my computer the pictures open as a slide show on my screen; each one brighter and more vibrant than the one before. I can hear the street sounds, smell the garlands, and taste the air. Two weeks ago I really was in India.

I have visited Diane Seed at her Roman Cookery School on several occasions. I love the way she enthuses about every aspect of the culinary experience; from the group visits to the markets to buy fresh produce to cook that day, to the informed and patient imparting of method and the delightful mealtime anecdotes. Diane always seems to manage to blend the perfect group; brought together by a love of food and a desire to learn but always relaxed and fun loving. A bond will have developed before the first bottle of perfectly selected wine is even half empty; it is as though Bacchus is still smiling over Diane's little corner of Rome.

When a trip to India was suggested I jumped at the opportunity, seldom would one be offered the chance to spend any length of time in such a beguiling country with such an engaging host. I have worked many times in India and I am aware how difficult it can be to make, and moreover execute, the most basic of arrangements - I was a little worried. Doubt should never enter ones mind when Diane is involved. The whole trip was seamless; transfers were painless and even a national strike only delayed our schedule by an hour or so. Diane also managed to achieve the largely unachievable, a perfectly planned itinerary. Never was too long or too short a time spent in the handpicked heritage hotels where we stayed. Each hotel had a history and an individual charm; which made each stage of the journey unique. From the boutique Goan hotel run by an exquisitely chic

sister and her charming brother, a mansion and former Jewish meeting house in Cochin to a merchant's beach side bungalow in Alleppy; a beach where the locals gather every night to fly kites and watch the sunset on the Arabian Sea. A collage of magenta and cyan saris, highlighted with flecks of silver and gold foil kites, against the backdrop of the largest, most vividly orange, reflected, sinking sun you are every likely to see.

Of course there was also the reason we were there in the first place; the food. In Goa we cooked and ate some of the most piquant and delicate fish curries I have ever tried. Pomfret is a local favourite and quickly became one of mine. As in Italy, each chef we met in each hotel, restaurant or home kitchen we visited, would have their particular way of doing things. We quickly learned that with Indian food there are no hard and fast rules; a cursory glance is much more accurate than digital scales and if you lack one ingredient use something else. The skill is really in the blending of the spices, which are of course key. Kerala – the land of the coconut – boasts a cuisine rich with creamy, subtle favours. Lots of vegetables and fish are eaten, but meat is also on the menu. Kerala and Goa are the only two states in India where beef is openly consumed. From morning appams, gastro lunches, afternoon teas on the loggias of garden villas, suppers on the beach, family dinners on a privately owned spice farm, the tandoor fish and paneer, my birthday banquet on the houseboat in Kerala, it would be difficult to choose a highlight. Although that was probably it for me; the crew buying prawns from fishermen over the side of the boat and the unlikely, iced birthday cake.

I would wholly recommend a trip to India with Diane Seed, whether it is your first time and you would like a gentle induction or as a seasoned traveller looking to see a side of the country one would be unlikely to experience without the wealth of experience from which Diane can draw.

If it's your birthday, just make sure you tell Diane.

