

New Destinations

The biggest thing that happened to tourism in Kerala was the opening up of three new destinations – Kumarakom, Munnar and Wayanad. In no time, these locations became hot favourites, with celebrities ranging from ex-Beatle Paul McCartney to the then prime minister of India, A.B. Vajpayee, holidaying here. Tourism was on a roll and investments poured into this sector. Destination management companies emerged and perception-wise, Kerala became the No.1 tourism destination in India.

One of the initiatives that fetched us tremendous mileage was that we invited M.F. Husain to spend a fortnight in Kerala to do a series of paintings, which he later titled ‘Kalyanikuttiyude Keralam’. Husain’s paintings were an exquisite evocation of Kerala – its lagoons, forests, cultural art forms and the many-hued greenery of the countryside with its emerald fields, banana groves and coconut trees. Replacing his trademark horses with elephants, Husain embodied the magic of Kerala through the dazzling fluency of his brush. These paintings were brilliantly interpreted by Shashi Tharoor in a special book on ‘God’s Own Country’.³ Tharoor’s essay was a nostalgic rendition by a writer who, despite being city born and bred, has an inordinate pride in the Malayali cultural heritage. The foreword that I wrote for that book summed it all up (see Box E).

Since then, the distinguished Indian artists, Yusuf Arakkal and Paresh Maitey, have painted canvasses of Kerala in all its vivid colours. Their works on Kerala have been viewed extensively and written about widely, capturing the imagination of the art world.

Maitey, in his book, *An Enchanting Journey*, describes his experience thus: ‘Kerala has always fascinated me. It is beautiful, lyrical, romantic and mesmerizing like my native land. Kerala presents a multitude of magical and captivating images. Its majestic caparisoned elephants, the endless carpet of green paddy fields, the curving contours of the boats, the fishing nets filtering the sunrays into prisms of translucent lightness, the filigreed pattern of the coconut trees against the charcoal skies pregnant with the monsoon and ethereality of its backwaters.



M. F. Husain's Kerala

This is a visual memoir of my numerous visits to “God’s Own Country”.’

In more ways than one, brand Kerala had arrived. And it was nothing but the strength of the brand that helped it survive a series of onslaughts – 9/11, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), the Gulf War and so on. While prices crashed in far-eastern destinations, Kerala was perhaps the only destination which held on visibly to the price line.

The brand’s response to a crisis also speaks volumes. When the tsunami struck in December 2005, the entire world thought that Kerala was also badly hit – which was far from the truth. In less than forty-eight hours of the disaster, officials of Kerala Tourism went on CNN, BBC and on Indian channels to reassure travellers that there was no need to panic or make any cancellations. The massive PR effort paid off and the season went by without too many cancellations of bookings.

‘In the summer of 2000, when I was the tourism secretary in Kerala, we decided to invite select celebrities to Kerala as part of a brand-building exercise. Needless to say, the first name that came to my mind was none other than Husain. He was the best brand God’s Own Country could be associated with. I invited him right away to do a series of paintings of Kerala. As always, he was delighted to accept the invitation. What touched me most was his simple statement, “No, I do not want any money. I’ll do it because I love Kerala.”

We travelled the length and breadth of Kerala. Beaches, backwaters, hill stations, waterfalls, wildlife sanctuaries, cultural centres. We dropped in on creative giants like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Abu Abraham, M.T. Vasudevan Nair and O.N.V. Kurup. All along, Husain painted. “If Kashmir is all about men and mountains, Kerala is about women and nature,” he said. Which is more than evident in his series of fascinating paintings, which he chose to call “Kalyanikuttiyude Keralam” – the Kerala of Kalyanikutti, the epitome of the ordinary, yet extraordinary Kerala woman.

It is this set of paintings that inspired this book. As you turn these pages, you’ll discover the magic that Kerala, God’s Own Country, inspires. You’ll discover the ever-evolving Husain – white and grey, yet full of colour; feet on the ground (literally too), yet an imagination that’s always soaring; a graceful eighty, yet a raring-to-go twenty. That’s my Husainda. Your Maqbool Fida Husain.’

From my Foreword to *Kerala: God’s Own Country*