

Indian ODYSSEY

Heidi Fuller-Love experiences vibrant colours, mountain vistas and tantalising cuisine while driving her motorhome down the western coast

1 Kerala backwaters (a chain of lagoons and lakes) near Kochi
2 The 10m-high, wooden-beamed Chinese fishing nets of Kochi fishermen
3 A street vendor in Mangalore
4 A rural village outside of Panaji
5 Receiving an elephant's blessing in the streets of Kochi
6 A ferry carrying passengers to Fort Kochi

When we told friends we planned to drive through India in a motorhome, they thought we were crazy – how would we even get our vehicle over there? After a lot of research, we decided that the best course of action was to hire a motorhome from a company in Delhi. A few months later, on a hot March day, we left Mumbai on the first leg of our trip.

The silhouettes of Mumbai's glittering skyscrapers sank into the pewter horizon behind us as we whizzed over the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, a striking bridge linking the city to its crowded suburbs.

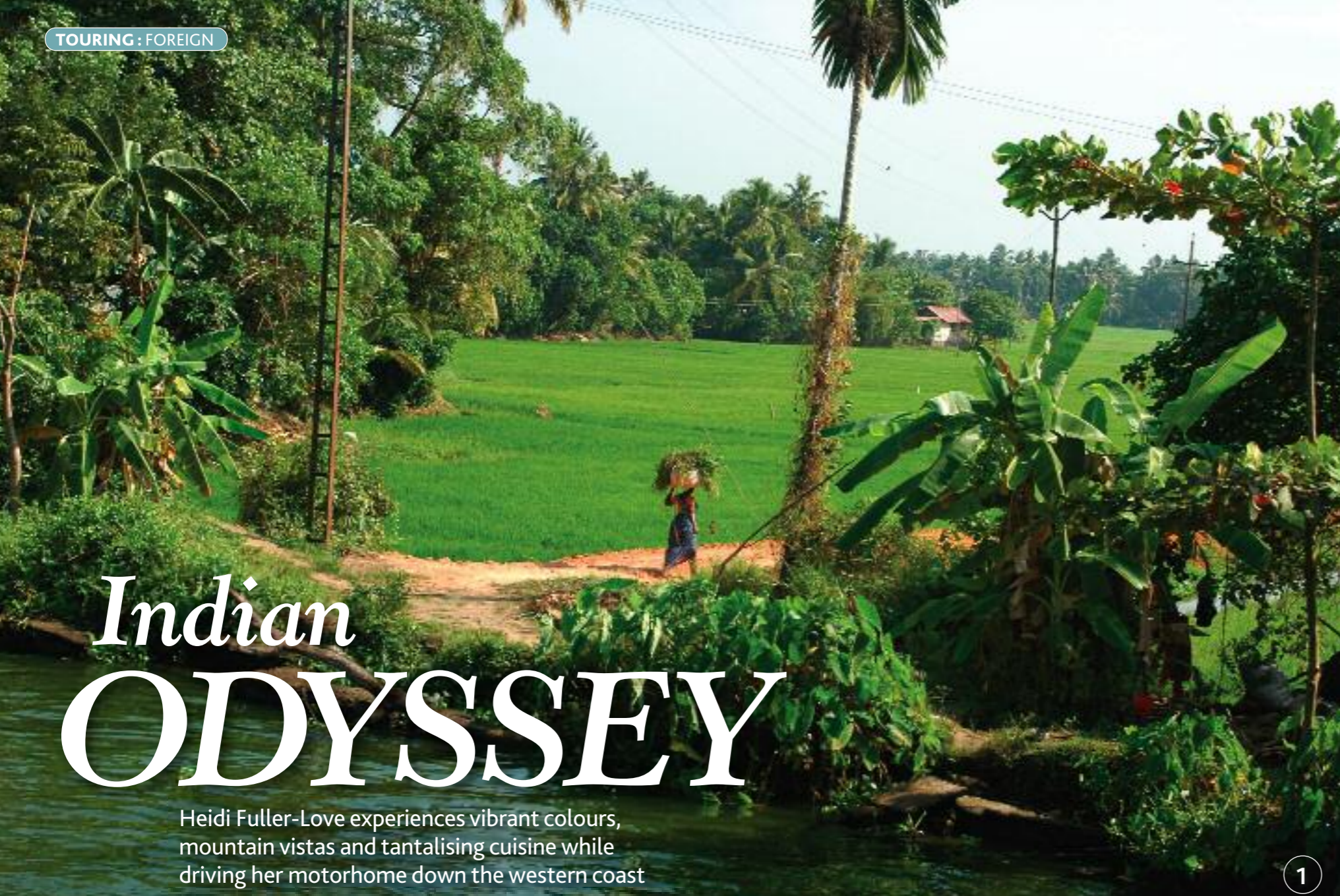
We planned to do our first drive along the picturesque National Highway 17, which

links Mumbai's outskirts with Kochi (also known as Cochin) and travels the 800-mile-long Spice Coast, following the Arabian coastline on one side and the foothills of the Unesco-World-Heritage-classed Western Ghats mountain range on the other.

Panvel, a straggling, congested town famed for its bird sanctuary, was our first stop. It is also renowned for its watermelon, which we bought from tin-roofed stands by the side of the road and cut into big, juicy chunks. From Panvel's dusty, pot-holed, rubbish-strewn main road, we turned into busy traffic on the NH17.

NERVOUS START

Our first real driving experience in India was a little nerve-wracking, but we soon got used to avoiding the gaping potholes, big-horned





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DID YOU KNOW?
Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama died in Kochi in 1524. He was temporarily buried in St Francis Church.



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7 Spices for sale in Panaji's lively market
8, 9 Traditional dancers and celebrations in Kochi
10 You soon get used to avoiding Brahmin cattle when driving in India
11 Fishermen in traditional boats on the Arabian Sea

Brahmin cattle and careering vehicles that constantly veered into our path.

Soon, we were driving up a winding mountain towards Mahabaleshwar. As the road climbed higher, the shadows cast by mighty blue gums grew longer and a refreshing breeze fluttered the bright orange petals of marigolds in wayside shrines. It was easy to see why planter families came to this hill station to escape Bombay's heat and dust during the steamy summer months.

Surrounded by forest and set high on a plateau, Mahabaleshwar is a blissful refuge, so we decided to stay several days to visit Arthur's Seat, Wilson Point and other panoramic spots that were named after British administrators who held court here during the 19th century.

Campsites are few and far between in India, so we approached one of the government-owned tourist guesthouses. For a small fee we were allowed to fill our water tank and use a parking space for the night.

On our last day we went to Mahabaleshwar's brash, boisterous bazaar and bought local speciality 'Vada pav' – a sort of spicy vegetable burger. We then had a picnic at Bombay Point, listening to the chatter of monkeys as the sun set over the dense forest below.

Up early to avoid the midday heat the following day, we took on the long drive to Panaji, entering Goa's capital city via a scarily narrow road that gave us stunning views of ornate churches beside the Mandovi river far below.

Ruled by the Portuguese for four-and-a-half centuries, this pretty city has been a popular stop off on the 'hippy trail' since the 1970s, and we saw plenty of backpackers as we strolled along avenues lined with frilly-leaved acacia trees, to visit the city's ornate Baroque gems.

Over the next few days, we shopped for Goan cashew liquor and other specialities on 18th June road, went birdwatching at the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary and just lazed on Miramar's palmtree-fringed beach, watching women in gorgeously vivid saris bringing their children to play in the waves.

On our final evening, we headed for Fidalgo, a busy hotel-restaurant serving some of the best Goan cuisine in town, and enjoyed piled-plate-loads of tangy mackerel curry and other delicious local dishes.

Heading out on the road again, we spent the night at a truck stop, one of those vast parking areas filled with foodstalls and hammocks where drivers spend the night. Despite the noise of revving lorries at 3am, we slept well and were up early to make the eight-hour drive along rutted roads to Mangalore.

SPICE WORLD

One of the Malabar Coast's main spice ports for centuries, Mangalore is a steamy, sprawling coastal town buried in palm trees. We spent several days visiting spice plantations bursting with turmeric, ginger and caradamom and drove out to see fantastically ornate temples,

returning for dinner in one of the town's famed restaurants.

The final stage of our trip to Kochi was only about 260 miles but it took three days because large stretches of this spectacularly scenic route were so bad that we had to crawl along at under 10mph.

As we entered the Kerala region, in the setting for Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*, the scenery was noticeably lush and there was less poverty.

Kochi, the Malabar coast's main port and once vital hub of the spice trade, is a delightful town. We stayed in Fort Cochin, the old part of town, and spent days just strolling out to watch the fishermen with their unwieldy-looking, 10m-high wooden-beamed Chinese fishing nets, introduced here from Macau in the 14th century.

At sunset on our last day in Kochi, we ordered an iced lime soda at a bar overlooking the Arabian Sea and raised a toast to our trip. We were dusty, aching and exhausted, but we were proud to have completed the first leg of our journey with a motorhome in India. ■



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