

Kerala backwaters now add yachting to tourism attractions

Kerala backwaters, famous for their scenic beauty, snake boat races and huge house boats, offer you something more these days - a leisure ride on yachts.

The increasing popularity of leisure boating in the state has opened up new opportunities for tour managers to introduce yachts to attract as many tourists as possible, industry officials say.

'Spending a weekend on a boat, with a little fishing and barbeques on board, is slowly becoming an accepted norm these days,' said Mathew Cherian, president of Nautilus Yachts, a Kochi-based yacht-manufacturing company with a boatyard in Thailand.

He added that in Kerala, 'any boat bigger than 30 feet with cabins would qualify as a yacht', while the super-yachts in the US and [Europe](#) will be more than 50 feet in length and will cost millions.

Nautilus is building high-powered air-conditioned single cabin boats of 16 feet that cost Rs.1-2 million as well as ones costing more than Rs.20 million with more cabins and electronic fish-finders.

Cherian said the demand for private high-speed boats was going up in Kerala as more and more Keralites were getting attracted to leisure boating. Moreover, the tourism authorities are taking steps to boost backwater tourism in the state.

The Kerala Tourism Development Corp has announced it will set up a 'marina' at the Bolghatty Isle in Kochi to solve the problem of parking of yachts and boats.

A marina is a sheltered harbour where boats and yachts are kept in the water.

This will be the first ever marina in the country.

Although [Mumbai](#) and Goa are the primary spots for yachts, there are no marinas at both places.

'With land prices riding high in Mumbai, it is not surprising,' said Joe Nejedly, an expert in yacht manufacturing and owner of Praga Marine, based in Coimbatore.

A couple of real estate builders have already approached Nautilus Yachts to build marinas exclusively for its waterfront apartments in Kochi, Cherian said.

A new concept called fractional ownership - which means a group of people (normally between 5 and 10) collectively own a boat and share the expenses - is persuading more people to invest in yacht tourism.

A former MP from Kerala now has a 32-foot Bayliner, a seafood exporter cruises on a 42-foot Sea Ray, a tyre tycoon keeps a 32-foot Bayliner and the Taj Malabar at Fort Kochi owns a 55-foot Gulf Craft Ambassador.

According to industry estimates, the increasing popularity of leisure boating here will make India one of the favourite markets for yacht makers.

'Although the West has not set up a boatyard in India yet, they have started investing in publicity agents to boost demand for their products here,' said Nejedly, who worked with the European parent company Praga Marine for 30 years before moving to Coimbatore.

The British-born Nejedly has his boatyard in Aroor, a small village in south Kerala. 'Now, I have to step up the quality of my boats to compete with rivals,' he said.

He added that the government could help the industry by setting up buoys for inland navigation and clearing the waterways.

Tourism industry officials hope the stopover of crews participating in the Volvo Ocean Race 2008-09 in Kochi this week will increase the popularity of yacht tourism in the state.

Eight competing crews of the Volvo Ocean Race will arrive here Wednesday for a 10-day stopover.

The Volvo Ocean Race, which is also called the Everest of Sailing, is one of the most demanding and daring team sporting events held every four years. The 2008 edition has 11 ocean legs, seven inshore races and Cochin Port is the only destination chosen in India.

The race began in Alicante, Spain, on Oct 4 and will cover a total of 39,325 nautical miles over nine months and end in July 2009 at St. Petersburg, Russia.

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