

Follow the Dhows

by Captain Michael J. Howorth with photography by Frances Howorth

The perennial shortage of water led the people of southern Oman to seek sustenance across the sea, sailing from their barren coastline in hand-built wooden dhows carrying out-bound cargoes of frankincense, dates and dried fish towards the Malabar coasts and returning laden with lentils, rice and spice. It was this seventeenth-century spirit of adventure that led to the flourishing sailing trade between Oman and India that has continued apace even to this day. The sturdy craft crewed by these intrepid sailors still ply their trade under sail, although the encroachment of motorisation is slowly making its mark on these primitive craft. In planning our own voyage of adventure following in the wake of these dhows, primitive craft were the last thing on our minds for we had chosen the ultimate in luxury passenger living – sailing on board the tiny liner *Hebridean Spirit*.

As cruise ships have become larger and carry thousands of passengers, Hebridean Island Cruises Ltd has chosen to operate passenger ships in a slightly different league, and one which we find infinitely more pleasurable. The company has two tiny ships. Their newest, *Hebridean Spirit*, carries fewer than eighty passengers, with a crew member for every one, and it was this magnificent ship that we boarded on New Year's Day at the start of 2003 as she lay alongside the dock in Muscat the capi-





tal of Oman. Controlling the east and west sea routes, the atmospheric seaport of Muscat, with its natural harbour guarded by twin Portuguese forts dating back to the sixteenth century, was the perfect port from which to begin our luxury voyage. Squeezed between arid brown-black mountains and the waters of the Arabian Gulf, this modern capital still remains a charming conurbation of lush, green gardens and subdued white buildings edged with bright hibiscus, oleander and bougainvillea.

Our two-day stay in Oman enabled us to get a true flavour of the country which, before 1972, was little more than a feudal backwater beset with tribal rivalries and constant skirmishing. Now, its souks and markets are infinitely more peaceful yet every bit as successful at invoking their Persian past. The souks are covered maze-like alleyways lined either side with brightly lit bazaars festooned with goods for sale. You can buy 24-carat gold of a glorious honey-coloured hue or try on traditional clothes such as a Dishdasha or Jallabia while smelling the commerce in the air wafted along on the sweet scent of burning frankincense.

There is still time for culture, visiting museums and palaces belonging to the sultan, and time for a day at the races – but if you're thinking of Ascot and ladies in large hats, think again! In Oman the speedy four hooves belong not to horses but camels. Our day at the races was crowned by an Omani feast when we ate the traditional Shawa meal of goat marinated in date vinegar and spices then cooked for twenty-four hours inside a pit dug deep into the desert sand.

Shaking the sand from our sandals, we returned to our floating palace as she prepared to cast off her mooring lines and sail for India. At the stroke of four bells in the dog watch, with our piper playing Amazing Grace, *Hebridean Spirit* slid past the guardian forts of Jalali and Mirani and set sail in the wake of the dhows for India.

I first went to sea in 1967 and am never truly happy to be ashore, so the thought of two days crossing the Indian Ocean on

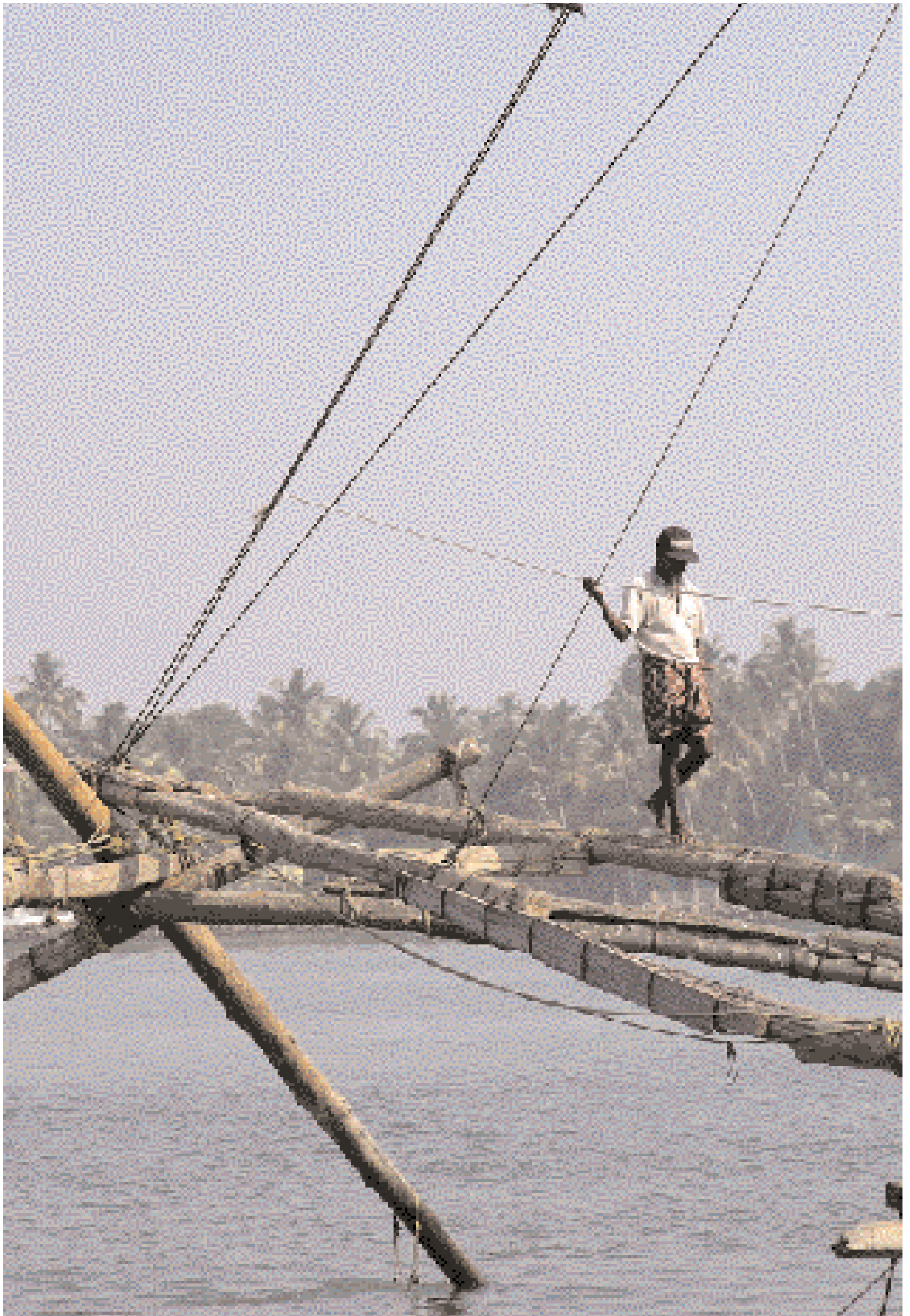
board a liner bound for the mighty sub-continent filled me with joy. *Hebridean Spirit* has a delightful motion when at sea, her creamy white wake carving a pathway through the blue ocean and her decks obeying the gentle swell. Comfort in operation and luxurious in both appointment and service is how I would best describe this ship. She has an almost club-like feel to her. Indeed, many of her current complement of passengers are old friends of the ship and her crew. Our cabin is huge by yacht and ship standards, a full 26 square metres of superbly appointed space featuring a king-size double bed, a comfy seating area, a study desk come dressing table and a wonderfully large window to view the world through. The ship is manned by British officers, surely the finest trained in the world, and crewed with Ukrainian nationals, whose happy, smiling faces match their 'can do anything' attitude. As passengers we wanted for nothing on board. Food is fantastic, drinks delicious and add nothing to the bill because everything is fully included within the fare. There were no extras for gratuities, drinks or even shore excursions. For me, the days at sea passed all too quickly. I enjoyed the experience greatly. Together with everyone else we had free and easy access to the bridge at any time. Everyone was encouraged to visit to see how the ship was controlled and navigated from her nerve centre. It was from here, at 06.00, after two and half days at sea, that I first smelled land. India is a concoction of wealth, spice, commerce and greed almost, but not completely, overwhelmed by the stench of filth.

Mumbai, or Bombay as it is perhaps better known, is set dramatically on a peninsula. Originally seven islands, it has over the centuries benefited from serious landfill. The Portuguese settled the site in 1534 as part of their quest to secure Portuguese trade domination of the Indian Ocean. Mumbai was then just a fishing village or settlement used by dhow fisher folk who had named their home after their patron goddess, Mumbadavi. British possession of the area came later after Portugal bundled it into the

Previous Page: *Hebridean Spirit's* arrival in Cochin.

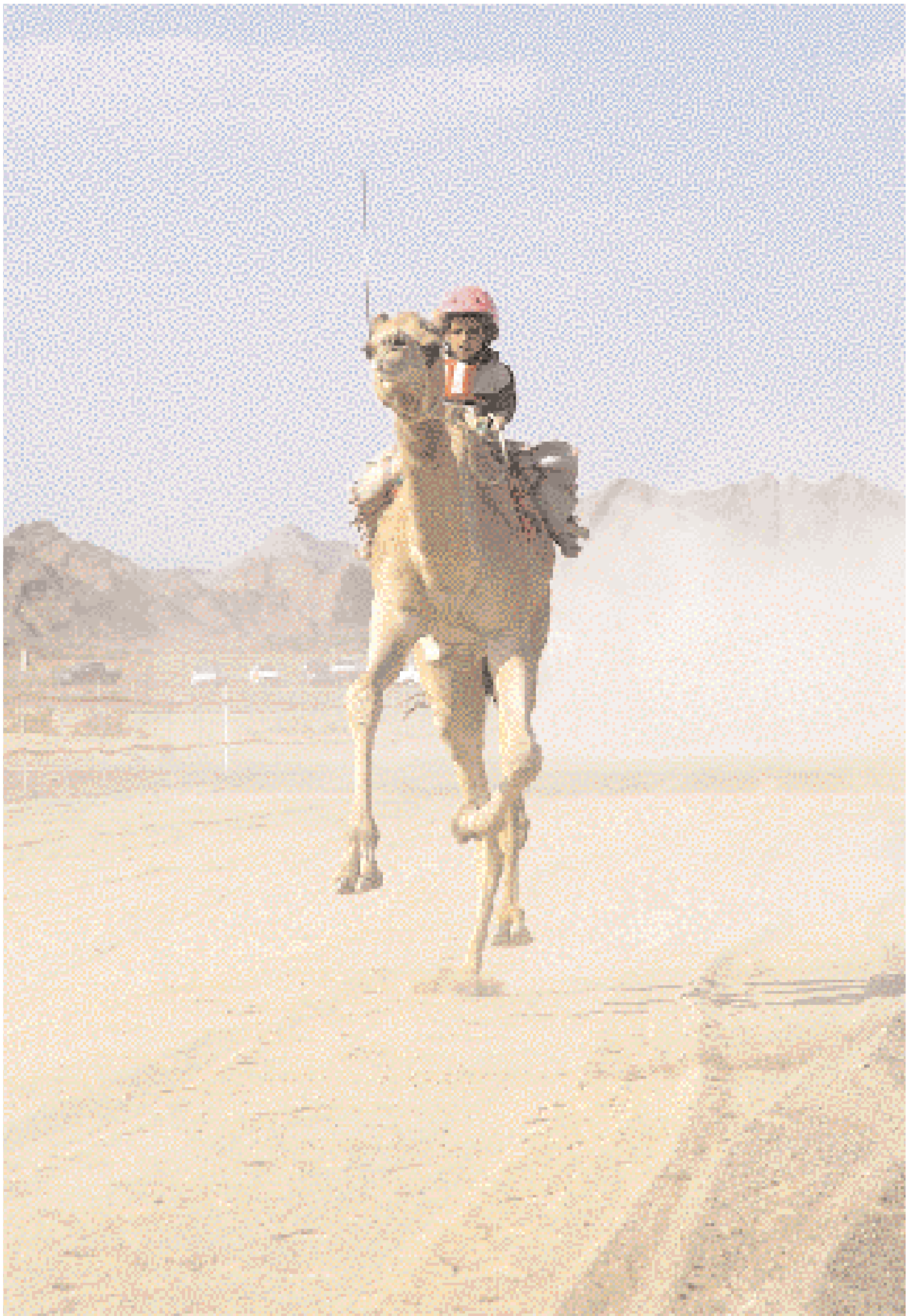
Above: Hats, bottles and silver ornaments are among the trinkets you can pick up in Omans capital, Muscat.

Right: A young man returning from checking the fishing nets in Cochin.











Left: A day at the races, Omani-style. Camel racing is big in the country where jockeys are often as young as four years old.
Above: A panoramic view of the 300 year old Janjira island fortress.

dowry of Catherine of Braganza when she married King Charles II in 1661. He, in turn, leased it to a trading company in London called the East India Company for the princely sum of £10 in gold per year.

As Bombay has flourished so its population has grown to the point where now a staggering 20 million people are crowded into an area of just half the size of London (whose own population is just eight million). Some four million live in slums, whilst a further one million live in supreme luxury to a standard that we in the west associate with a millionaire lifestyle. Overcrowding is a major problem and lack of space for expansion further exacerbates the situation.

Our stay was short and hectic, Bombay roads are chronically congested, and pedestrians cross the road with little regard for on-coming traffic. The cacophony of car horns competes with the bleating of oxen that still pull carts around the streets of the city, further adding to the gridlock.

Our first stop was to view the gateway to India. This impressive portal was constructed in honey-coloured local basalt stone to commemorate King George V's visit to his Empire in 1911. Some 85 feet tall, this edifice follows the Gujarat style and incorporates many Hindu and Muslim features. It became the focal point for travellers arriving in Bombay aboard the P & O liners who used its steps to embark and disembark. It is also remembered as the backdrop to the final departure of British troops from India in February 1948. We took tea in the splendour and grandeur of the luxurious Taj Hotel set back from the gateway and then drove to Malabar Hill, half hidden in the smog and haze that perpetually hangs above the city. Here is the richest and most expensive real estate in the Indian sub-continent; in an area where prices are well above those of Mayfair imagine the value of one 17-acre site said to belong to an Indian princess who lives high up on the hill.

The west coast of India is literally littered

with fortresses from bygone eras and as we meandered southwards we explored quite a few, each one different from the last. Our first was at Diu. Captured from the Ottoman Turks in 1535 by the Portuguese, who prized its position on vital trade routes between Arabia and the Persian Gulf, Diu is now only a sleepy phantom of its illustrious past. The superb fort, its crowning glory, stands solidly on a tidal marsh, with cannons boldly pointing from bastions out to sea. It is a wonderfully atmospheric site to wander around. In the afternoon we savoured the island's tranquillity as we explored its southern side by bike.

Leaving behind this windswept island, we sailed overnight to Murud Janjira, the invincible sixteenth-century capital of the Abyssinian Siddis, which is renowned for its enchanting beaches fringed by long stretches of lush coconut and palm groves. The majestic, impregnable 300-year-old Janjira island fortress lies just off the mainland and is one of the most impressive in the Maharashtra region. It stands guard over the tranquil fishing village of Murud. To reach it we embarked in traditional hodi boats and silently sailed across to explore the secluded fortified ruins.

Next was Malvan, a picturesque fishing town, situated in a secluded, sun-blessed region of magnificent white beaches washed by a sparkling sea. Inland lies a lush, green and gently undulating landscape of cascading waterfalls and attractive wadi-side villages growing a profusion of tropical fruits, a paradise for nature lovers. Malvan's pride is the impressive Sinhudurg or Ocean Fort, set on a 48-acre offshore island. Built by the ruler Shivaji in 1664 to the glory of the Maratha Empire, it contains small temples and a handful of houses shaded by coconut palms and frangipani trees. We joined fellow passengers on an idyllic Tarkhali beach for a seafood barbecue lunch before we sailed in the early evening for our anchorage at Dona Paula in Goa.



The once Portuguese enclave of Goa is a fascinating fusion of east and west, Asian and Mediterranean, Hindu and Christian. Temples sit beside Christian churches in a setting more redolent of southern Europe than southern India, where skirts have long vied with traditional, brightly coloured saris and cuisine may be spice- or wine-based. Gleaming white Baroque coastal churches stand silhouetted against red soil. There are many groves of cashew trees, and dilapidated forts guarding rugged capes give way inland to rice paddies and the exotically elegant temples of Shri Mahalsa and Shri Mangueshi at nearby Mandol.

Travellers seldom visit Old Goa, which, in its prime, rivalled the splendour of Rome and Lisbon. A symbol of Renaissance influence against the exotic backdrop of modern India, sadly only a few impressive churches and cathedrals now remain. On our walking tour of this wonderful old city we explored the UNESCO World Heritage site and historic monuments in an area redolent of Portuguese colonial days.

The port of Cannanore, mentioned by Marco Polo, flourished in the prosperous spice trade with the Middle East. Vasco da Gama first landed on the Malabar Coast in 1498 in search of spices – and that most coveted spice of all, pepper, once more valuable than gold, grown in the monsoon forests of Malabar. The Venetians took control in the late sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch and British with their powerful East India companies, who planted cardamom and cinnamon. Once ashore we enjoyed a fascinating visit to the 300-acre Arjarkandy Cinnamon Plantation established by Murdock Brown of the British East India Company in 1862. Here women strip aromatic bark from trees, and essen-

tial oil is squeezed from cinnamon leaves using ancient, massive steam-powered presses. A splendid locally inspired lunch was laid on at villa Ayisha Manzil, once the home of visiting British circuit judges, with its magnificent views out to sea. There we were treated to an exciting display of traditional Kalaripayattu martial arts, an art form that originates from the area of nearby Kerala. We re-boarded *Hebridean Spirit* as she lay at anchor off the unspoilt beaches of the fishing port of Telicherry, then overnight we sailed for Cochin.

Ancient Cochin, Queen of the Arabian Sea, basks in an idyllic setting. Blessed with a superb natural harbour created in a flood in 1341, its name aptly derived from kocchazhi meaning new harbour, this ancient city, built on a cluster of islands and narrow peninsulas, remains a major port and naval base. Our early morning arrival saw us gliding past a horizon of cantilevered, quayside Chinese fishing nets each nodding and dipping as they sought to capture every last swimming fish from the water.

A gateway to India since early times on the main trade route between Europe and China, Cochin boasts a wonderful array of architectural styles, a tribute to its myriad invaders, including the Portuguese, Dutch and British who competed to control the port and its lucrative spice trade. Wandering the narrow lanes, we were immediately enthralled by its exotic, cosmopolitan atmosphere. We visited the Dutch Fort by tuk-tuk, decrepit rickshaws resembling the motorised offspring of a strange liaison between an ice-cream vendor's bicycle and a Vespa motor scooter. Risking life and limb on crowded roads we puttered along to the Indo-Portuguese Museum and India's first European church

Above: The easily recognisable Chinese fishing nets of Cochin provide a dramatic view for anyone entering the city by sea.

Facing page: The traditional rice barges of Alleppey - an up and coming form of tourist transport!



St Francis Xavier, the Dutch Portuguese palace of Mattancherry and the nearby Jew Town, the site of the very first settlement. Eclectic Cochin is a living kaleidoscope of contrasting sights and sound. It may be down at heel but it remains one of India's most atmospheric towns. A multitude of cultures, Arab, Portuguese, Dutch and Jewish, have co existed here for centuries. Fourteen languages are spoken within a two-mile radius. The town is quintessentially Kerala, but turn a corner and you will find not only India's oldest church but also a sixteenth-century synagogue next to it. Nowhere in India is so conducive to unwinding as Kerala's tranquil Malabar Coast. Once the scene of frenetic attempts to control the international spice trade, its shady backwaters are now gently traversed by comfortably converted rice boats. High in the backdrop formed by the Western Ghats are tea plantations and the fascinating Periyar wildlife sanctuary, whilst secluded beach resorts nestle on the coast. We could not wait to sample more of the Costa Kerala and the following morning drove to Alleppey, a pleasant, palm fringed town built around a maze of bridges and canals which have earned it the name or title of 'Venice of the East'. It is the centre of Kerala's famous coir industry. This market town lies by romantic backwaters, known as Kuttanad, a unique 50-mile-long geological formation bounding the coast in a network of freshwater lagoons, lakes, rivers and canals. We voyaged through these backwaters on board a traditional, punted rice barge – large, beamy, simple wooden boats held together with coir and each possessing an elaborate roof of coconut matting. Many have now been pressed into service as tourist cruise boats

carrying four or six passengers, each in tiny two-berth cabins. Complete with cook and a picnic afloat, we glided blissfully along peaceful, palm-shaded lakes and narrow canals, lined with boats carrying coir, copra and cashews.

The backwaters serve many functions. To many houses, whose property fronts them, they are both kitchen and bathroom. Pots and pans are washed on the banks and bodies are washed in the waters themselves – sometimes behind discreet hand-made screens and other times under a shady tree to offer some privacy. The same waterways are used by fishmongers selling their wares from dug-out canoes, but those who prefer to do away with the middleman cast their nets out into the waters and hope to strike lucky. Birdwatchers amongst our party eagerly and delightfully pointed out the profusion of species with fish eagles, a malachite-flash of kingfishers, egrets, herons and lilac-breasted rollers.

Perhaps only India can convey such a frisson of excitement and conjure up such exotic splendours and perfumed dreams. Year after year, the old magic that drew so many adventurers continues to exert its fascination. It is one of the world's oldest continuous civilisations; India embraces cultural riches other countries can only envy. To visit India by sea is to relive the splendour of the Raj. To voyage there aboard *Hebridean Spirit* is like putting Cornish clotted cream on a freshly baked scone covered with lashings of homemade strawberry jam – sheer unadulterated luxury.

Frances & Michael Howorth travelled to Oman and India with Hebridean Island Cruises and were accommodated aboard their liner Hebridean Spirit.