

HOMESTAYS

A WIN-WIN DEAL FOR TOURISTS AND RESIDENTS

THOUGH STILL IN ITS INFANCY, THE HOME-STAY IS TURNING OUT TO BE CONTAGIOUS WITH AN INCREASING NUMBER OF KERALITES OPENING UP THEIR HOMES ACROSS THE STATE (NEAR PLANTATIONS, BACKWATERS, VILLAGES AND BEACHES) TO TOURISTS.

DISHA RATHORE

While only a couple of homes were being operated as home-stay options seven to eight years ago, now the number has swelled to about 200, says **KS Bhagladas** who started inviting guests into his home, The Kandath Tharavad in the Palakkad district, some eight years ago. He reveals that it has been a winning proposition for both parties. For foreign tourists, this is as authentic an experience as they will ever have. Living with a family and sharing their home, food, culture and everyday-life, is an opportunity that draws several tourists to these home-stays.

PG John Tharakan of Ayanat House, who started out very recently, only a couple of months ago in fact, is offering a product that is not just limited to food and board. He also offers country boat rides, sightseeing in the village, cycle riding and cooking lessons. Sherly's, a three-bedroom homestay, is offering cooking classes too and also has a full-time housekeeper. As managing partner of this enterprise, **Rekha Thomas** ensures that guests are offered a property as a "total experience" unlike at hotels. The main markets for these home-stay providers have been the European and

the Americas.

The USP of home-stays has been – especially those built in the traditional Kerala architectural style – the personalized holiday and the fact that these holidays cost much less than hotels do. Bhagladas feels that it is the one-to-one interaction with the family members as well as with the farmers and fishermen and other locals that is the main draw of this type of holiday. The length of stay in this segment can range from two nights to a week; most offer a weekly rent which is very economical.

A double room at Shirley's is priced at Rs 2,750 for a week and at Planter's Homestay, a two-nights and three-days stay is priced at US\$ 90 and includes interaction with the rubber planters as well. Bhagladas says that he lets out his rooms for US\$ 150 for a week whereas a standard room in any of the 5-star hotels in Kerala costs anywhere between Rs 5,000 to Rs 8,000 per day. This has undoubtedly been a big draw for the pocket-friendly traveller and has increased the popularity of home-stays.

PC Davis, who has been promoting Planters Homestay near Kodamanglam, says that it is mainly between the months of September and April that one receives guests. There is enough business in this segment as there aren't many rooms on



KS Bhagladas



PG John Tharakan



Thressi John



Rekha Thomas



PC Davis



Paul Pooppally

offer (somewhere between 2-10 at most homes), explains **Paul Pooppally** of **Pooppally's Heritage Homestay** in Alleppy.

The popularity of home-stays is growing which is evident in that the occupancy has risen over the years from about 40 per cent when Pooppally started in 1998 to 95 per cent during the season today. Bhagaldas says that the off-season occupancies have also risen in the last couple of years and that this year he had about 70-to 80 people visiting between March and September.

Increasing occupancy and an encouraging response from the trade, as well as the clients, has led those offering home-stays to improve their services. **Paul Pooppally** has increased his room count by adding two traditional cottages and a water-plank house. He says that the need to upgrade is essential as clients are unsure of the standard of the bathroom facilities and other basic amenities. Bhagladas too has added attached bathrooms with showers and running hot water and closets in the six rooms he offers. He has also widened his product offerings to include visits to

nearby places as well as to offer an opportunity for guests to interact with village artisans, potters, basket-weavers and even farmers.

While those offering home-stays are improving their facilities, there are others who are innovating the product-mix. **Thressi John**, the owner of Nazarani Tharavad, which is located at a midpoint between Munnar and Kochi, for example, has introduced lunches and teas to visitors enroute to Munnar and Kochi.

Thressi is of the opinion that being a small player it has been difficult to market the product and feels that the home-stay providers need platforms like the Kerala Travel Mart to promote them efficiently as they lack the promotional and marketing tools available to large and medium hotel chains.

Home-stays is definitely an emerging segment. The movement will no doubt pick up in other states as well and when it does we might see traditional hotels in leisure destinations a little worried. It may take some time though, but it will definitely prompt them to offer more authentic experiences. **IT**