

ALL QUIET ON INDIA'S SECRET ISLANDS

Part of the same marine mountain range as the Maldives, the little-known Lakshadweep archipelago offers idyllic scenery – minus the crowds. By **Jo Caird**

Arriving at a tropical island can never be considered a hardship. But after a 16-hour ferry journey blighted by seasickness, pulling ashore at Kadmat seemed all the sweeter. In fact, as I sat in the shade of a palm gazebo – a calm, bright blue sea just metres away – I'd never in my life been so pleased to be handed a coconut with a straw in it.

Kadmat is the centremost island in the Lakshadweep archipelago, a low-lying chain of islands, atolls and reefs off the coast of Kerala. Belonging to India, the Lakshadweep islands are part of the same vast marine mountain range as the Maldives. But unlike on their southerly neighbours, which are being developed almost to saturation point, the natural side of Lakshadweep remains intact. The islands are protected by a local administration keen to promote tourism

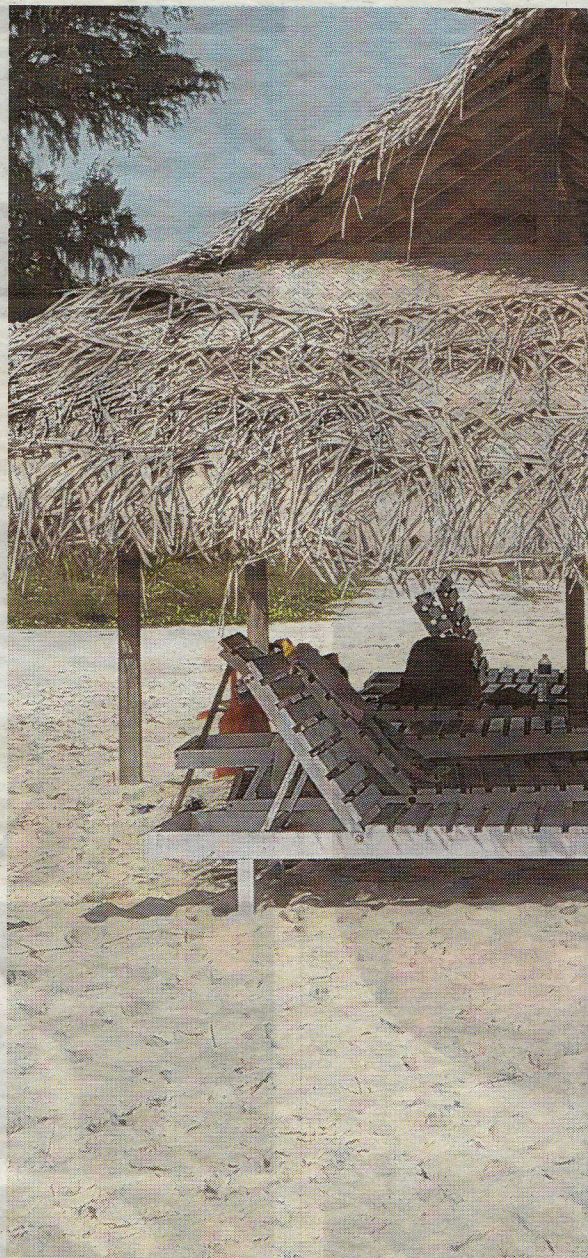
with a low environmental impact. The infrastructure is almost entirely government-run, with a focus on ship-based tourism to relieve pressure on the islands' limited resources. Visitor numbers on the islands are kept deliberately low. Kadmat is the only island open to non-Indian visitors, with Kadmat Island Beach Resort (again, government-run) the only available accommodation.

Getting there isn't easy, either. Your options are the overnight ferry from Kerala's main city, Cochin – which requires a ship-to-shore transfer in a diesel-chugging converted fishing boat – or flying to the Lakshadweeps' only airport on Agatti Island (also from Cochin) before completing your journey with a two-and-half-hour high-speed boat ride. Either way, it's hardly convenient. This, presumably, is how the Maldives used to be.

The archipelago's name comes from the Sanskrit word for the number 100,000 – "*lakh*". Poetic

licence wins out over numerical accuracy, as in reality there are just 36 islands in Lakshadweep. Only 10 of them are inhabited. Most of teardrop-shaped Kadmat's 5,000 inhabitants are employed by the fishing or coconut trade. Outside the resort, there are no restaurants, bars or other amenities for tourists, although you can visit the coir and desiccated-coconut factories in Kadmat Village, the island's only settlement. The administrative centre of the archipelago is Kavaratti Island, where the capital, also called Kavaratti, is located. Kadmat does not concern itself with the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

I'd been lured here by the promise of extraordinary diving and snorkelling – as well as the intrigue of going to a place no one had heard of. Instead, I found myself captivated by the quiet dignity of life on the island. No one attempted to sell me tourist tat, asked me for money or tried to





rip me off – a state of affairs that compared favourably to the Indian mainland. Travelling along the island's only road, either in the resort's tiny shuttle bus, by rickety bicycle or on foot, I caught sight of children walking in immaculate school uniforms, head-scarfed women sweeping patterns into the dust of their unpaved front yards and young men playing football on a comically uneven beach football pitch.

Kadmat is only 550 metres wide at its broadest point – and far narrower at the end where the resort is located – so I could see the sea sparkling between the palm trees at all times, only needing to turn my head to catch a glimpse of the coast.

To say that Kadmat is peaceful would be a considerable understatement. The Kadmat Island Beach Resort has a maximum capacity of 50 guests, but on my visit it was about two-thirds full. Finding a private patch of flawless, white sandy beach

is no more of a challenge than running into a noisy traffic jam on the Indian mainland. A handful of auto-rickshaws, a few motorbikes, legions of bicycles and one tiny bus make up the sum total of transport on Kadmat, so even outside the resort I luxuriated in the quiet.

Accommodation is comfortable: simple air-conditioned huts with porches and – in some – hammocks. Guests only congregate for optional activities – including kayaking, snorkelling and excursions in a glass-bottomed boat – and at meal times. These are all served buffet-style in a room reminiscent of a village hall at the centre of the resort. Anticipating the rich, coconut-based curries of Kerala and the succulent fresh fish of Goa, I was disappointed by the rather bland offerings of mixed vegetable or chicken curry and daal (very little produce is grown on Kadmat). With alcohol prohibited on this Muslim island and no nightlife

Sun, sea and silence: (clockwise from main) one of Kadmat's white sand beaches; the dive boat; the low-key resort

JO CAIRD/STEVE PRETTY

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Ampersand (020-7289 6100; ampersandtravel.com) offers a seven-night stay at Kadmat Island Beach Resort from £1,960 per person. This includes international flights from Heathrow, return domestic flights from Cochin to Agatti, return boat transfer from Agatti to Kadmat and full-board accommodation in a standard AC hut.

Cochin in Kerala is the gateway to the islands, where Kingfisher (0800 047 0810; flykingfisher.com) has six flights a week to the airstrip on Agatti Island. Boats also depart from here to Lakshadweep.

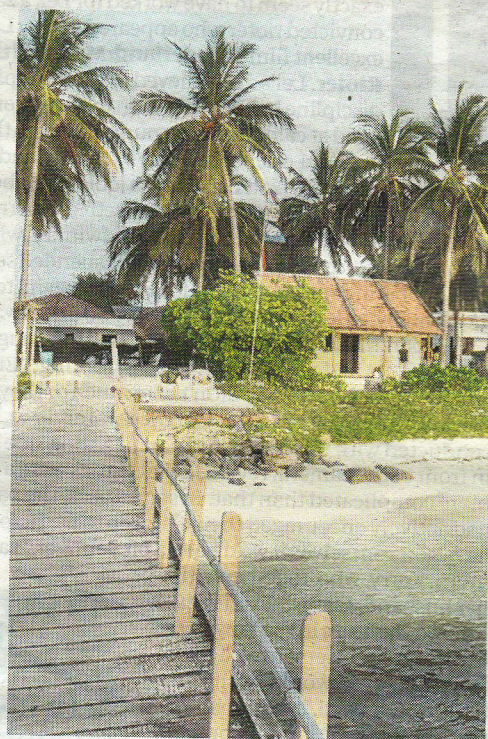
Staying there

From within India, visitors wishing to dive may book travel and accommodation directly via Lacadives, one of the Lakshadweep Tourist Board's approved agents (lacadives.com).

More information

British passport-holders require a visa to visit India, obtained from the India Visa Application Centre, by post or in person at centres in London, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Hayes, Manchester and Glasgow (in.vfsglobal.co.uk).

India Tourist Board: 020-7437 3677; incredibleindia.org
Lakshadweep Tourism: lakshadweeptourism.com



other than after-dinner chitchat with my fellow guests and occasional starlit walks, bed time arrived early on Kadmat. The main benefit of this was that I could get up early to explore the surrounding Laccadive Sea. Lakshadweep is the only destination in India's western waters populated with coral. Goa may have beautiful beaches, but if it's unspoilt marine wildlife you're after, Kadmat reigns supreme.

Diving is organised by Lacadives, a private company at the resort, managed

by a charming Danish couple called Marieke and Torben. Day and night dives afforded breathtakingly close encounters with reef sharks, eagle rays, green turtles, box fish, lionfish and dozens of other sea creatures. Snorkelling trips in the shallow lagoon opened up a sun-dappled world of hard coral and piscine visitors, with turtles making the odd appearance. Back up at the water's surface, I caught sight of fishermen standing in the shallows, gradually closing up huge circles of netting before hauling in their catch.

One evening before dinner I visited a local fishermen's hut, where tuna was being smoked over smouldering coconut husks. My host explained that during the monsoon, when fishing outside the lagoon is dangerous and boats from the mainland arrive infrequently, smoked tuna is the islanders' main source of protein. The next day, a tour in a rickshaw took me down the road running

the 8km length of the island to the only village, with its jetty, small shops and modest homes. On the way, I stopped at the incongruously large and brightly painted Juma Mosque, one of 70 mosques serving the island's Sunni Muslim community. Close by, a beautiful 100-year-old banyan tree lurched precariously towards the sea, its roots feeling their way down into the sand.

Sitting at the southern tip of Kadmat on the last evening of my stay, the chaos of the mainland was far from my mind. The five other guests at the resort were nowhere to be seen. Apart from a hen and her chicks clucking to each other further down the beach, I was alone with the sunset, the sea stretching away in all directions from the narrow peninsula. There may not really be 100,000 islands in the Lakshadweep and foreign tourists may only be allowed to visit one of them, but Kadmat is good enough for me.



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