

THE SPICE IS RIGHT

Exotic spices and welcoming family kitchens are the ingredients for learning how to cook in Kerala, as **Caroline Phillips** reports

COCONUT with everything. That's how my youngest daughter happily sums up our culinary tour of Kerala, south India.

Our first lesson takes place in the kitchen of a colonial bungalow overlooking the Arabian Sea. Wearing a blue sari and apron, our cookery teacher, Faiza Moosa, stands next to 16 dishes of pungent spices, from fiery chillies to local cloves.

A fan redistributes the breathless heat. Sandalwood incense burns and a lizard crawls up the wall. We're a long way from the sanitised industrial kitchens and cookery courses of Europe.

"These coconuts come from our garden," adds Faiza, Kerala's premier cookery teacher. "They're in most of our dishes."

We are at Ayesha Mazil, our first gastronomic stop, in the town of Tellicherry. A colonial-style guesthouse with four-poster beds, it is also home to Faiza, 50, and her husband.

I'm with my two young daughters, Anya, 13, and Ella, 11, learning basic Indian cookery in three different venues – without paying a fortune, and enjoying sunshine, too.

Before we start our lesson, we go to the market near the Moosas' home, to buy our ingredients and discover endless varieties of exotic local fruit and vegetables: from banana blossom (like maize) and long green drumsticks to karela, with its gnarled skin.

Then Faiza's husband, who likes to be called "Moosa", whisks us down a crowded alley to the fish market – for kingfish, stingray, shark and pomfret. "Fishing boats come in three times a day," explains Moosa.

Back at the guesthouse, Faiza stands amid ready-prepared ingredients

(there are nine staff in her home). Kerala's cuisine is subtle, different from anything else in India, and combines alchemical combinations of spices with influences of Portuguese, Syrian Christian, Jewish and Arab cuisine – introduced by traders over the centuries. Faiza teaches the Moppilah (Muslim) cuisine of her Arab forefathers.

We make Chemmeen Varattiyathu (tamarind prawns) – marinating the crustaceans in coconut oil, orange chilli powder and turmeric. We squeeze tamarinds and sizzle onions, green chillies and mustard seeds for sauce.

Meanwhile, Faiza speedily produces a chicken dish with aniseed, ginger and garlic. A cinch. Afterwards, we whisk jaggery (unrefined sugar), coconut milk and eggs, steaming them in a copper "vanduchembu" for Moppilah crême caramel. Our lesson (producing one meal) takes nearly three hours.

The next day, after breakfast, it's time to leave. Driving to Sultan's Battery, we see our ingredients growing – from turmeric plants to cardamom shrubs. Kerala is a lush land with abundant rainfall and paddy fields, spice plantations, coconuts and fresh waters.

We reach Tranquil, a guesthouse on a coffee plantation surrounded by rubber, fruit and spices. We sleep in a treehouse but cook on terra firma. Our hosts are former planters Victor and Jini Dey, newcomers at cookery courses but old hands at cooking.

Our classroom is a backroom with a corrugated ceiling and freestanding gas stoves. Here they teach old family recipes – a mouth-watering fusion of styles. Servants wander in and out, giving us lime sodas.

Our lesson is with chef Sashi, Jini and her daughter, Neesha – with Neesha translating the chef's Malayalam. We

cook Naadan chicken curry – a Masala fish dish and spinach with onion flowers. Various kitchen hands and dogs join us at different times. At lunch afterwards at a communal table, we eat

our produce as monkeys play nearby.

Then we go by train to near Kanam. Our final destination, Serenity, is a 1920s bungalow-style boutique hotel in Vazhoor, famed as much for great food as its pet elephant, Lakshmi.

On a hilltop with views over the Western Ghats, Serenity has colonial furniture and artefacts and an ayurvedic spa. The cookery demo room is equally elegant – a dining room with gas rings atop its antique table. Our teacher is Rineesh, a fresh-faced young man wearing a tall chef's hat, chef's whites and an apron. It's all very Swiss, like one of the hotel's owners.

Before he's finished teaching us to make local specialities of cashew nut paste and curried fish, we have an electrical blackout (not that uncommon in India) – but somehow he talks and cooks through the dark. Afterwards we devour lemon and lentil soup, curry and stuffed bananas.

But our food odyssey doesn't end here. Even flying home we eat delicious vegetable curry with warm nan bread. And when we get back, we manage to make our own delicious Indian feast.

There might not be any coconuts in our London garden but at least the children have learned to cook.

DETAILS KERALA

THE TOUR

Scott Dunn has eight nights from £1,957pp full board staying at Ayesha Manzil, Tranquil Plantation and Serenity, including cookery courses, return flights with Kingfisher Airlines and private transfers.

- www.scottdunn.com
- www.keralatourism.org

Peace offering: boutique-style hotel Serenity holds cookery courses in the main house



Market forces: traders sell colourful fruit, vegetables such as banana blossoms and long green drumsticks and spices in a local Keralan food market