

ing possibilities for exchange, both by students and teachers. Two other films by Tran Van Thuy that teachers in the United States have found useful are *The Story of Kindness*, an award-winning work that exalts kindness over power as it probes the gap between words and deeds, and has been described as having an 'almost cult-like' international following; and *Story from the Corner of a Park*, a more recent release, a sensitive meditation on the grace with which a poor family faces the difficulties caused by the care of their two disabled children, thought to have been affected by Agent Orange. For further information on Tran Van Thuy's films, contact the Fund for Reconciliation and Development at <http://ffrd.org> or First Run Icarus Films <http://www.frif.com>. ■

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## Hidden India The Kerala Spicelands

Direction, editing, and music by Jan Thompson  
Written and hosted by Bruce Kraig

Produced by Food for Thought  
Productions  
2002. 60 Minutes. VHS. Color.

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Alexandria, VA 22314

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**H**idden India: *The Kerala Spicelands* is a colorful, vibrant presentation of many aspects of culture in Kerala, a state located on India's southwest coast. Described by its producers as an introduction to the "culinary traditions and culture" of Kerala, the video discusses topics ranging from growing and harvesting spices, to religion, to the legacies of historical contact with Europe and other areas of Asia.



Best known for its spices, Kerala is described as having "the highest literacy rate in India" (above ninety percent) and a better quality of life than "anywhere else in India, Africa, and most of Asia." The video segues smoothly through a variety of topics, beginning with a brief historical background that includes the introduction of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to India, and the coming of the European explorer merchants led by Portugal's Vasco da Gama in 1498. The growing, harvesting, and preparation of food is a recurring theme. Spices such as black pepper, cardamom, ginger, nutmeg, and turmeric are found in the mountainous Ghats, while staple foods such as coconuts and rice grow in the lowlands. Food markets in Kerala include non-native foods such as potatoes and chili peppers that were brought from Central and South America to India by Portuguese merchants. Host Bruce Kraig maintains his enthusiasm throughout his narration, even while chewing *paan*, an araca (betel) nut wrapped in a palm leaf. Paan is a mild narcotic and is used as a digestive aid.

Keralite culture is illustrated not only through food, but also through arts and religion. Kathakali, or "story dance," is a feature of the arts in Kerala in which actors portray all emotions through elaborate facial expressions. The dances are based on classical literature such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Hinduism is woven into segments that show a marriage ceremony, and describe the caste system, discussing the degree to which it is observed in Kerala. Viewers also observe festivals, such as the Great Elephant Parade, in which people costume themselves as representatives of Hindu divinities. The video concludes with a discussion of British and Asian legacies in India. The British introduced railroads, the parliamentary democracy form of government, and tea plants and rubber trees to south India. The Asian influence is seen in the Keralites' use of large fishing nets such as those used in earlier times by Chinese merchants. These help demonstrate Kraig's conclusion that in Kerala, "the traditional and the new exist side-by-side."

*Hidden India: The Kerala Spicelands* is appropriate for use in high school and college levels to introduce students to the culture, customs, religions, and foods of southwestern India. A caveat should be mentioned: the video describes Hinduism as a "polytheistic faith," which is not how many Hindus view it. Hinduism is monotheistic and henotheistic, recognizing a single Supreme God manifested in many forms such as Vishnu and Shiva. This point aside, the video beautifully and actively illustrates its topics, each of which lasts about four to seven minutes. The video could also be used in short segments to illustrate a specific point. ■

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