

## Trip Dossier for India – Backwaters of Kerala

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India's Deep South is a total contrast to the better known North and utterly distinct in terms of landscape, culture, history, food and language (and definitely more relaxed). The two states we visit, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, are themselves very different to each other and give a great insight into the differences that can exist in this vast subcontinent. Lush, green Kerala is a coconut paradise with its watery landscapes, beautiful beaches and verdant mountains. Tamil Nadu is distinctly drier and more frantic with the pilgrimage centre of Madurai, the most famous temple in India, a real assault on the senses. Savour the foods, sights, colours and sounds and, above all, the warm welcome for all visitors.

### Day 1 Fly to Kochi

Depart from London to Kochi (previously Cochin) by overnight flight.

### Day 2 Arrive Kochi; sunset cruise

Your flight arrives at Kochi in the afternoon. On arrival in this historic port, you will be met by our local guide and transferred to your hotel (75mins) on Willingdon Island where you may relax or explore your new surroundings. Later this evening you are invited on an optional sunset cruise, passing by Chinese fishing nets; built of teakwood, these nets were erected between 1350 and 1450 AD. They are mainly used at high tide, requiring at least four men to operate their system of counterweights. The nets are lowered into the water by a crane-like structure and raised a few minutes later. Return to the hotel mid evening. **Hotel 2 nights, with swimming pool (breakfast)**

### Day 3 Kochi; City tour and Kathakali show

In the morning enjoy a sightseeing tour of the city, known as "The Queen of the Arabian Sea". It is also famous for its exquisite designer gold jewellery. During your tour you will see the Dutch Palace, built by the Portuguese for a local King in 1555 AD, and the famous Jew Street, a cul-de-sac leading to the beautiful Parsi Synagogue built in 1568. The walking tour of Fort Kochi takes you through city streets still graced with traces of Portuguese, Dutch & British colonial architecture, including a few old trading factories, the only ones still standing anywhere in the world, juxtaposed with cricket greens. In the afternoon, you'll visit a local school, where the children can play football, learn a few words and swap stories. This evening you will be invited to see a Kathakali dance performance, the traditional dance-form of Kerala. This classical dance requires lengthy and rigorous training to attain complete control of the body and sensitivity to emotion so as to be able to render all its nuances through facial expressions and hand gestures. The dances are based on the two great Indian epics - the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Kathakali dance is a most stunning display of poise, elaborate make up and the art of story telling. We will arrive early to see the make-up being put on by the artists and we can also arrange for one of the Kathakali artists paint your face in the same way that has been followed for generations.

### Day 4 Visit Elephant Training Camp and drive to Munnar area.

Head off early to the Kodanad Elephant training camp (1.5 hrs) to see these majestic animals at close quarters. During your time in Kerala you may come across domesticated Elephants on a number of occasions, often just walking along the road, as there are plenty of them in the state as working animals in the fields, plantations and forests. They also have a more ceremonial role attached to temples or making guest appearances at weddings & similar celebrations. The catching of wild elephants was banned many years ago however there is still a regular flow of new arrivals, mainly in the form of those injured or orphaned, where it is very difficult to reintroduce them back into their herds. At Kodanad you will see both young and mature animals, will see them getting fed and, with any luck, will get a chance to help wash them in the Periyar River. The mahouts will show you how they like to be scrubbed behind the ears – expect to get a bit wet!

After a few hours at the training camp you'll continue your journey across the lush green tropical landscape into the foothills of the Western Ghats and to the Munnar area, approx 135 kilometres (four hours drive in total). The road climbs up firstly through rubber and spice plantations before the appearance of dense forests and, in certain seasons, plentiful waterfalls crashing down from the hills. Although the distance is not great there is a lot to see and you will no doubt make many stops along the way for photos, drinks, fruit... Once up high Munnar offers breathtaking views of hills draped in folds of green tea gardens which create an almost surreal landscape. Lazily nestled in the verdant slopes of tea country, Munnar is a quaint little town that exudes a rare old-world charm and reminiscent of the days of the Raj in its faded elegant splendour and distinctive bungalows. Beyond the rolling hills, discover the rich tropical forests abounding in exotic flora and fauna. It is here that we find the Anamudi peak, the highest peak in the Western Ghats in South India. Munnar's serene atmosphere, silver streams and pleasant climate, a real contrast to the tropical lowlands, invites us to enjoy the cool mountain breeze. Our hotel is located outside Munnar with gorgeous views of the beautiful mountain landscapes. **Hotel 2 nights (breakfast)**



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## **Day 5 Visit to Evarikulam National Park and a tea plantation**

During this day we will explore the Munnar regions so expect plenty of stops for photos or snacks and the chance to wander in the town itself if you wish. This morning we visit Evarikulam National Park, home to the endangered mountain ungulate - the Nilgiri Tahr. This animal looks like a large goat/antelope, the males weigh around 100kg and stand at 110cm at the shoulder. The female is a lot smaller weighing around 50kg and stands at 80cm at the shoulder. They have curled horns and short grey/brown pelage (fur). Older males are called 'saddlebacks' as they have a distinctive silvery saddle-like patch marks on their rump, and their coat darkens to a deep chocolate colour. Their habitat is grassland with rocky outcrops, where they graze in early morning and in the evenings, while keeping a watchful eye for their predators, namely the tiger, leopard and wild dog. Over the last century, their numbers have dropped registering them as an endangered species. This is due to the loss of habitat from the encroachment of domestic livestock grazing area as well as poaching. A conservation policy is in place at Evarikulam National Park where they monitor the numbers and regular patrols stop the poachers. In the afternoon we will visit a tea museum, plantation and tea factory where you can learn about the whole process of tea, the different qualities, and production techniques. The children may even be able to help with picking the tea and of course there is the sampling – by now everyone will hopefully have been able to taste the ubiquitous sweet Indian chai!

## **Day 6 Descend from Ghats, drive to Madurai (4 hours), evening Sri Meenakshi temple visit.**

Time to head down from the mountains but there will still be plenty of things to see in the hills from tea and spice plantations to beautiful vistas. The state border crossing is set right on the edge of the hills with dramatic views down the escarpment onto the Tamil Nadu plains. You can see the road in the distance winding its way down and there are no foothills as such. As soon as you descend the difference between the states is evident. The land is much drier, although there are plenty of commercial crops being grown, the towns look poorer, there are suddenly ox-carts in abundance and signage is very much in Tamil with English rarely seen. It is very distinct to Kerala and you may well make plenty of stops along the way – perhaps to grab a fresh coconut milk or see a brick making factory in action! Finally you approach Madurai, a pilgrimage centre for centuries and home to the most famous temple in India. After relaxing at the hotel and having dinner you head right into the city centre for an evening visit to the temple - this amazing hubbub of streets that radiates away from the shrine is a real contrast to the tranquil mountains you have left. You visit in time to see the evening procession when an image of Sundareswarar (Siva) is carried through the temple to be placed alongside that of his consort Meenakshi to 'sleep'. Expect pilgrims, priests, musicians, torches and an exciting taster of the life in this extraordinary complex.

## **Day 7 Madurai; Sri Meenakshi Temple**

Today you will visit the highlights of Madurai the 'nectar city' so named after drops of nectar dropped here from the god Siva's locks. The history of the city goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and it has been a centre of Tamil culture for over 2000 years, trading in turn with Greece and Rome. The temple complex itself dates initially from the Vijaynagar period is an outstanding example of their architecture and a contemporary of the Taj Mahal. Meenakshi (the 'fish-eyed goddess') has one temple and her consort Sundareswarar (Siva) another however what makes it rare here is that she takes precedence over her more famous and powerful partner. Although non-Hindus are not allowed in the inner shrines there is plenty to see as your guide helps unravel the Hindu pantheon. The complex is vast and dominated by the 4 huge Gopurams (towers) that are elaborately decorated with gaudy stucco-work and can be seen from far away across the city. Enter through the flower and garland complex where you may pick up an offering, run the gauntlet of the hundreds of stalls offering gifts, candles and trinkets for the devoted, and see the One Thousand Pillared Hall and Tank of the Golden Lotus. At some stage no doubt you will pass by the temple elephant who will bless you with his trunk in exchange for small offering and in each area you will come across pilgrims of all shapes and sizes drawn from across the subcontinent. This is a unique place which all members of the family will remember for different reasons!

In contrast to this your temple visit will also include stops at the newly renovated Thirumalai Nayaka Palace with its Indo-Mughal style domes and arches and the excellent Gandhi Museum helping to trace the life of the Father of the Nation as well as the whole 'Quit India' campaign. You may well find yourself travelling between these sights in a cycle rickshaw – as swift a way as any to get around the city centre and a lively introduction to its narrow streets! You have a whole day in Madurai so you may decide to spread the visits out however there should be time to relax in the afternoon and reflect on this maddening whirl of a town.

## **Day 8 Drive to Periyar and learn to cook a local dish**

Say goodbye to Madurai and head back across the Tamil Nadu plains passing through small market towns, paddy fields and maize plantations. As you approach the Western Ghats the region becomes a major fruit growing zone well watered from the Periyar Dam in the hills. The final approach is very steep up into the lush forest zone, passing the huge irrigation pipes on the way. Before you know it you have crossed the border into Kerala and the town of Periyar (also called Thekkady or Kumily). The afternoon is free to explore the small town,

we are located centrally, and its surrounds, perhaps pick up some spices and souvenirs or just relax by the pool surrounded by cardamom bushes. Our hotel in Periyar is built among rosewood, sandalwood, mahogany and teak trees, the air is infused with the scent of nutmeg, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, clove, vanilla and other exotic spices. Take a walk through the trees inhale these fragrant aromas. During your stay, you can learn how to cook some of the local Kerala delicacies. We can arrange a makeshift kitchenette with all the ingredients outdoors, and the hotel chef will more than willingly impart his culinary skills to you and your kids. In the evening, we highly recommend an optional visit to see a dramatic performance of Kalarapitya, the Kerala martial arts (approximately 1 hour). This unique form of martial arts includes bouts with and without weapons and will show you something of the variety of techniques and styles employed. From swords, daggers, spears, flails and scarves there are specific moves related to each form and, possibly, there will be a chance for members of the audience, of all ages, to try out some of the equipment themselves – under supervision! **Hotel 2 nights, with swimming pool (breakfast)**

#### **Day 9 Periyar National Park: Elephant spotting from a boat on Lake Periyar**

This morning you'll enjoy a gentle cruise on Lake Periyar in search of herds of wild elephants. One of the largest wildlife reserves in India, the sanctuary is spread over an area of 777 sq. kms in the Cardamom Hills region of the Western Ghats. We would recommend taking an early cruise to get the best light and viewing times and as well as elephants you would hope to see sambar, bison, spotted deer along with abundant birdlife. Leopards and the elusive tiger do exist here and are seen occasionally but realistically it is very unlikely you will catch a glimpse from the boat. Later on today there is the option to ride on elephant back and see these majestic creatures at close quarters again. You can also join the elephants for a bath and get showered by them so bring along your swimming gear. In the afternoon you can hone your bush trekking skills with experienced forest guides and learn how to track animals. This afternoon, it is possible to visit the spice plantations to see exactly how crops are grown, harvested and processed.

#### **Day 10 Drive to Alleppey and board your private "Kettuvallam" house boat.**

Today you'll be driven down from the hills to Alleppey, approx 120 kms (three and half hours drive), where you will embark on our converted rice-barge, ready to cruise gently along the backwaters. The backwaters are a bewildering labyrinth of waterways, composed of lakes, canals, lagoons and rivers, lined with dense tropical greenery. They preserve rural Kerala lifestyle that remains largely hidden from the road. Birdlife, kingfishers, eagles or parrots abound and all manner of boats and watercraft can be found. Bridges of all descriptions exist and it can amaze you to see the tiny pockets of land upon which some houses or hamlets exist. The rice houseboat traditionally known as 'Kettuvallam' is made entirely of natural materials; wood, rattan and bamboo, in harmonious tones of brown and honey. It has neither engine nor machinery of any sort on board. Sixty eight feet long and ten feet wide, with a slightly unturned prow and rear, it sits low in the water. In front, roofed but otherwise open to air, is the living and dining area, its sides shaded by shutters propped open at midway by bamboo poles. This comfortable space is covered with coir matting and is furnished with rattan chairs, day bed style mattress and a table. Although the superstructure is only a few years old, the boat itself is a century old. Until it was reconditioned as a rice-boat, it transported rice and wood. Enjoy this relaxing cruise along the backwaters passing by small villages, rice paddies, and rubber plantations where daily life takes place on around and in the water! This is a time to chill and watch life gently pass by - relax with a book, join the crew with fishing and try your hand at the Asian game of Carrom. **Rice House Boat (breakfast, lunch & dinner)**

#### **Day 11 Return to Kochi.**

This morning you are likely to finish off your cruise on the waters of Lake Vembanad as you make your way back to the dock. You will see the early morning 'commuter' boats packed to the gills and no doubt lots of smartly dressed school children being ferried to and fro. After leaving the boat head north to return to Kochi (1½ hour drive). The afternoon is at leisure so you can relax by the pool or try out one of the ayurvedic treatments you have been hankering over. Perhaps return into Fort Cochin to explore its charming streets further or pick up some souvenirs or antiques in the raft of emporia that crowd the narrow thoroughfares. **Hotel with swimming pool 1 night (breakfast).**

#### **Day 12 Fly to London**

This morning you will transfer to Kochi international airport (1 hour) for your return flight to London.

#### **Beach extension to Mararikulam**

If you have time we would strongly encourage you to extend your stay in Kerala with time on the beach at the Marari Beach Resort.

#### **Days 1 – 10 As above**



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## Day 11 Drive to Mararikulam (45 minutes)

This morning you are likely to finish off your cruise on the waters of Lake Vembanad as you make your way back to the dock. You will see the early morning 'commuter' boats packed to the gills and no doubt lots of smartly dressed school children being ferried to and fro. After leaving the boat head to the Arabian Sea coast (45 mins) and the gorgeous Marari Beach resort. **Hotel 3 nights, with swimming pool (breakfast)**

## Days 12 & 13 at leisure to relax on the beach and explore.

The next few days are at leisure for you to enjoy your beautiful surroundings. Set right on the beach this child-friendly resort is noted for the traditional design of all its buildings and superb service. With a very sensitive eco-ethos the resort goes out of its way to ensure harmony with the local environment and at the same time show that luxury and comfort do not need to be compromised in any way. Children (and adults) can join the in-house naturalists on bird, butterfly or local village walks, most of the vegetables come from its own kitchen garden and as much as possible is recycled and reused. A stunning pool is complemented by tennis, volleyball & badminton courts; there is a games room and relaxing library and skilled Ayurvedic centre. If this all sounds like too much after you have explored southern India then do not fear - there is a hammock with your name on it strung between two coconut palms a stone's throw from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean....

## Day 14 Return to Kochi.

The afternoon is at leisure so you can relax by the pool, perhaps return into Fort Cochin to explore its charming streets further or pick up some souvenirs or antiques in the raft of emporia that crowd the narrow thoroughfares. **Hotel with swimming pool 1 night (breakfast).**

## Day 15 Fly to London

This morning you will transfer to Kochi international airport (1 hour) for your return flight to London.

*This itinerary includes our group flights from London. If you are making other flight arrangements, please refer to your Confirmation Invoice and Joining Instructions for details of the start or end of the trip. Please remember international flights and trip dates do occasionally change, so please always purchase flexible tickets.*

*Each itinerary is planned many months in advance and although it is our intention to operate the itinerary as printed in the brochure and detailed here, it may be necessary to make some changes as a result of alterations to flight schedules, climatic conditions, limitations of infrastructure or other operational factors which are beyond our control. As a consequence, the order or location of overnight stops may vary from those outlined but we will always endeavour to keep you informed of any such changes. Included meals are indicated in the daily itinerary.*

These excursions, if available, can be arranged through your tour leader and paid locally (per person cost shown below).

### Optional Extras

Bush trekking in Periyar National Park	£12.50
Have your face painted like a Kathakali dancer	£5.50
Learn to dance the Sitar in Kochi	£5.50
Learn basic bush trekking skills in the forest	£8.50
Elephant ride & bath in Periyar	£10.00
Kalarapitya Show	£5.00

**Is this right for your family?** This is a great break and brilliant introduction to India. The south is much more relaxed than the more frantic north and makes for easier travel. Hotels are all of a good standard, most have pools. Travelling can be slow at times but distances covered are not overly long and will always be fascinating given the endless variety of life in India. There is so much to interest children of all ages – learning to cook, visiting an Indian school, seeing elephants, cruising on a rice-barge...

**Lone Parents** Single parents or other adults travelling alone with children should be aware that some countries, including the UK, require documentation confirming that the individual has authority to travel with the minor. It is crucial that you contact the relevant country embassy for further information on exactly what may be required. These details can be found on the Foreign & Commonwealth Website under the appropriate country [www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel)

**Climate** The best time to visit the south of India is during October to March but it can be visited all year and is always hot! The summer monsoon usually eases off in August.



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Average monthly temperatures in Kochi

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
<b>Max °C</b>	32	32	33	33	32	30	29	29	30	31	31	32
<b>Min °C</b>	23	24	26	26	26	24	24	24	24	24	24	23
<b>Rainfall (mm)</b>	9	34	50	139	364	756	572	386	235	333	184	37

**Accommodation** All hotels have private facilities and are on a twin share basis and most of them are air-conditioned. All hotels are 3-star standard or better; modern, clean, comfortable with friendly service. Accommodation on the rice barge house boat is comfortable and clean with air-conditioning. The mention of a swimming pool at a hotel should not be taken as a guarantee but rather an indication. You should also be aware that swimming pools at the hotels are often unheated and so can be cold in the winter months or even closed.

**Food and Drink** Meals are included as indicated by itinerary. For meals in cities you should allow £10 per day for lunch and dinner, you can eat quite cheaply in India, but obviously if you dine in more expensive restaurants please allow more for your daily allowance. Your local tour leader will be on hand to make some personal recommendations. Most restaurants you are likely to use offer a combination of Indian and Western style food so if someone fancies a non-Indian meal it is usually pretty easy to get! Generally breakfasts will offer a good choice of Western (cereals, toasts and eggs) or Indian dishes and the south has lots of superb fruit juices to try. Kerala is famous for its fish and seafood and if you are a vegetarian, South India offers a wide variety of dishes and is particularly good in this regard. Please remember to drink plenty of bottled water during your visit.

**Local Costs** \*Based on a mid range tourist restaurant.

A small bottle of mineral water (500ml)	£0.50
A large bottle of mineral water (1 litre)	£0.80
A can of coke (soft drinks)	£0.40
A carton or bottle of fruit juice	£0.60
A bottle of beer	£1.50
Tea or coffee	£0.50
A light lunch time snack – sandwich for example	£2.00
A two course meal* - excluding drinks	£5.00
A three course meal* - excluding drinks	£7.00

**Currency** The unit of currency is the Indian Rupee (INR) at the time of writing UK £1 = INR 79.8 and 1US\$ = INR 47.85 (Aug 2009). Sterling Travellers' Cheques are accepted in banks and larger hotels however we increasingly suggest that you use the widespread ATMs. We recommend that you change money at the airport. Credit Cards are accepted in larger hotels and some souvenir shops but not in the wildlife resorts.

**Tipping** is a recognised part of life and although at your discretion you will be expected to reward service. It should be remembered, however, that over-generosity could lead to jealousies in poor countries. Please remember that all tips should be a way for individuals to thank staff for good service. We do not encourage the tipping of snake charmers, animal keepers or the likes.

Suitable tips from your family would be; Rs 30 per suitcase for bell boys, 10% of your bill at a restaurant, Rs150 per day for your driver, local guide Rs150 half day and Rs250 full day.

Please also remember that your tour leader works hard and for long hours to make your holiday run smoothly, a suitable reward for good service would be £1-£2 from each person, per day. It is usual to collect this between yourselves as a group and present it to the leader on completion of the tour.

**Time** India is GMT +5 ½ hours (Indian Standard Time) & 4 ½ hrs in summer (end of March to October)

**Language** Each state has its own regional language, in Kerala it is Malayalam and Tamil in Tamil Nadu. Hindi and English are widely spoken. Your guide will speak English.

**Security** Whilst the vast majority of travellers never experience anything untoward it is worth taking precautions particularly in urban areas. You should take sensible precautions in crowded areas such as street markets and airports, where pick-pocketing is common, and keep clear of any street disturbances. Don't wear expensive jewellery, never leave your bags unattended, keep large amounts of money, cameras and mobile phones out of sight when walking in town centres, and avoid walking in city centres after dark. Keep copies of important documents, including passports, in a separate place to the documents themselves, together with details of credit



cards. Leave copies at home with a friend too. Safeguard valuables, important documents and cash and deposit them in hotel safes, where practicable.

**Visas and passports** You must obtain a visa before travelling to India. Please allow plenty of time for your application to be processed. Passports should be valid for 6 months.

**Health** Vaccinations are recommended against Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Tetanus, Polio, Diphtheria. Malaria tablets may be recommended. Please consult your GP for further advice.

## Clothing & Equipment List for India – Backwaters of the South

Although western standards are generally becoming more acceptable, Indians generally remain very traditional in what they wear. Out of respect please dress conservatively, no sleeveless tops, while shorts are accepted in the main tourist areas, both shorts and skirts are to be knee length or longer. Arms and legs and occasionally ladies' heads should be covered when entering religious buildings. During the wildlife drives in open jeeps/canter (especially during October to mid March) it can be rather chilly so please pack warm clothing. It may be a good idea to take a smart casual outfit for an evening out.

CLOTHING	NUMBER PER PERSON	Check	EQUIPMENT	Check
Trainers or Strong Sandals	1 pair – all purpose wear		Soft-sided bag 50 – 80litres	
Waterproof Jacket	1 lightweight		Lightweight Daypack 25 litres	
Swim Wear	1		Towel or Sarong	
T-Shirts	3 +		Sunglasses	
Long Trousers or Skirt	2 +		Personal First Aid Kit	
Short Trousers /shorts	2		Torch and Batteries	
Long Sleeve Shirt	2+		Camera & Memory card	
Sunhat / Baseball cap	Essential (styled to shade face, ears and neck)		Insect Repellent	
Warm jacket	1		Sunscreen – lots of it	
Thin Fleece or Sweatshirt	1			

ITEM	Check	ITEM	Check
Passport/ Visa		Small umbrella	
Air Tickets		Universal travelling adapter	
Cash /Debit Cards/Visa		Earplugs	
Insurance Documents		Binoculars - optional	
Trip Information and Itinerary		Guide Book	
Money Security Belt/Pouch			

For details regarding **hand luggage restrictions**, please visit [www.baa.com](http://www.baa.com) for details