

Tea to the Sea

From Cochin to Thiruvananthapuram



All of India bombards the senses with its vibrant colour, aromatic spices and unique culture but if you thought that every where there was traffic chaos, industrial pollution and no place to find solitude then it is time to think again. It may be true of Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore but down south in the province of Kerala nothing could be further from the truth. Here nature rules supreme and its people love and respect their environment and live in harmony with each other and the land. They call it 'Gods own Country' and it is easy to see why. I recently took a tailor made trip with Travel Planners who have won many top tourist awards. Reputable, honest and able to suggest and put together a program to suit individual needs I found them excellent.

Chouchin Museum



TEA PLANTATION

TEA PICKER

MUNNAR AND THE TEA PLANTATIONS

After a busy day I sit on our veranda drinking my tata tea. Like a vast plantation house the hotel nestles amongst the tea plantations of Munnar. Melodic tones drift up from a near by temple and a thick haze sends everything beyond our immediate viewpoint into a muted world creating a sense of peace and tranquillity.

Our drive to Munnar earlier had taken nearly four hours as the narrow road climbed ever higher and higher. The views were spectacular, the sky deep blue and the vegetation a cacophony of every shade of green. After passing through banana and rubber plantations the hillsides gave way to a sea of tea bushes, each as flat as a pancake. Their neat well groomed appearance no doubt due to the fact that the tender shoots are now harvested with shears. Giant red poinsettia, blue jacaranda trees and flowers of purple, orange and yellow joined the mix. So too did giant black boulders which must have cascaded down the slopes when the landscape took its form thousands of years ago.



FRESHLY PICKED TEA READY FOR PROCESSING

The haze reminded us of Australia's Blue Mountains. Then surprise, surprise on the veranda outside our room eucalyptus trees towered. Later we discovered the trees were every where. It seems seeds were smuggled into the country by an official in his wife's stockings when they returned from Australia and soon their quick growing trunks were fuelling the tea factories.

We learnt this fact and many more at the tea museum we visited the following morning. We learnt too that the tea bushes are planted on only one third of the slopes so that they do not detract from its harmony and so create a sustainable environment.

All tea begins life in the same way. Green tea is considered to be of special medicinal benefit but in Munnar, black tea, which undergoes more drying, is today's 'cash crop.' The colonial owners, who set up the first plantations, left behind tea producing bushes now two hundred years old but they also left a legacy of housing, schooling and medical aid which still prevails today. Now we tend to think that we are the instigators of environmental conservation but that is not always the case.





OUR GUIDE SHOWS US GREEN PEPPERCORNS etc & STEPS TO THE TREE HOUSE

THEKKADY AND ITS SPICE

'Wild elephants' came the cry on day three and everyone tumbled from their vehicles. My eyes followed the pointing finger of a woman dressed in a brightly coloured sari. Then in amongst the dense vegetation I saw it wiggle its ears, flick its tail and then as it raised its head I detected two long tusks.

Our hotel that night was an ecological gem which clung to the steep mountainside. The giant panoramic glass wall of our 'villa' looked on to lush vegetation. A visit to a spice garden was comprehensive and we learnt all you needed to know about India's spices and its medicinal plants. Cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, star anise, ginger, nutmeg and turmeric to name but a few.

Peppercorns grow on vines and green, white or black pepper are all achieved by different drying techniques. We took copious pictures and in the shop we bought enough to keep us in curries and culinary delights forever.

After the tea and spice plantations we made our way through rubber plantations and coconut groves to the backwaters where we had our first introduction to Kerala's lakes and meandering waterways. Our hotel that night was set along the bank of a great lake. So vast it was impossible to see land on the other side.



Our boatman for the afternoon



OUT IN A LONG BOAT

Next day we took a trip on board a long boat. We relaxed in our wicker chairs as the boatman propelled it with a long punting oar. All was tranquil and quiet. We stopped several times and went on shore to meet the people who call it home. It was late afternoon and the fish were not biting but a willing fisherman demonstrated how he flung his circular net into the water. His haul was one tiny fish. We saw how they make their roofing from coconut palms. The coconuts

WEAVING RUSHES A DRINK OF PALM SAP FISHING AND THE AFTERNOON CATCH!

being left in the river for a few months to make their fibre pliable. We saw rope being made from dried fibre and I tried it myself while my companion climbed a coconut palm with the aid of two climbing contraptions. Later two men showed how sap is collected from the palm. The liquid was still sweet but when it is left all day by evening it has fermented into a kind of beer!



During the next two weeks we boarded a number of other boats on the water-ways and lakes. These included a trip to watch the lotus flower pickers. So quiet and peaceful in the early morning light. We also visited an early morning fish market where the fisherman were returning with their catch and selling it on the shore.



FISH MARKET AND VEG SELLER
OUTSIDE



MUTTUPETTY DAM

A contrasting adrenaline rush was a ride on the Muttupetty dam where we enjoyed a high speed powerboat ride on its emerald green water. The way down was steep and difficult. The boat sped along the picturesque shore lines, executed fast turns out in the water and Jon lost his cap, before heading again towards shore to see the cormorants. Bernard got a pillion ride on the back of a motor bike on the return but the ground

was still even, bumpy and just as scary! At the top we paused to say how do to some monkeys. The only thing we had to give them were tic tacs but they seemed to enjoy them as they crunched and relished their minty flavour

View points at Echo point and Pothamedu came next with an overview of Munnar before our return to the hotel

The vibrant colours of the girls in their Sunday best as they came into town with their parents to visit the marriage bureaus to find husbands were stunning. This month being the top month for nuptials. A procession was also in progress as young girls took offerings to the temple. On their heads they carried bright yellow gifts.





CRUISING & RELAXING ON BOARD

FISH FRESH FROM THE WATER WAY

LIFE ALONG THE WATER WAY CANALS

CRUISING THE WATERWAYS ON A CONVERTED RICE BARGE

One of Kerala's 'must do' trips is cruising on the backwaters which meander through the rice fields in a traditional rice barge. These have been converted into picturesque luxury houseboats and spending a day onboard with an overnight stay is awesome. Complete with Captain, engineer and our own chef three of us relaxed on board our two bedroomed air conditioned boat as it took us around waterways of every imaginable width. A cormorant caught an enormous fish beside the boat So big he had a hard time swallowing it. He struggled for ages as it twisted and gyrated in his beak. King fishers, eagles, bee eaters and enough bird species to satisfy the most ardent bird spotters abounded. At around 4 pm we transferred to a small dug out so that we could make our way down narrow

canals. All life seems to revolve around the water. We saw people washing their clothes, taking a bath, washing the dishes etc. Everyone paid little heed to our presence and none seemed to object to our presence.

Next day we woke early to watch the sun rise. It cast bright ripples of pink over the water. Fisherman in their small craft hauled a handful of fish on board or scooped up mussels. The boat swayed each time one of big rice barges began to make its way downstream after their overnight stay. The hundred man tiger boat rowers were also out. After breakfast we too joined the throng of old rice barges returning to port - at times almost causing a boat jam



BOATS RETURNING

WILDLIFE

Kerala is conscious that it needs to preserve its wildlife and no visit would be complete without a visit to its wildlife reserves. Many options are possible but we opted for a boat ride on Lake Periyar in the tiger reserve. We did not see tigers but we did see a herd of wild elephants. They were mourning the loss of the baby elephant in the troop. Unable to keep up

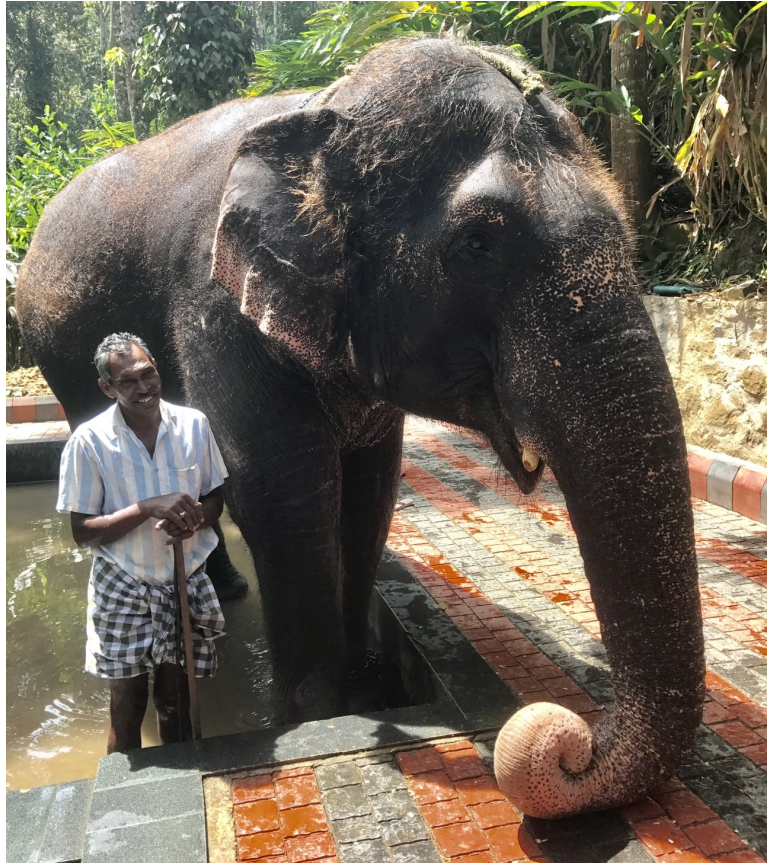
it had been taken by a tiger despite the wardens best efforts to try and save it. There were plenty of bison, deer, otters and many bird species. A panther had taken a deer and scavengers were taking the remains of the carcass. Here we also saw monkeys but they were here hoping to steal a quick easy meal from visitors. We did not see any wild monkeys ourselves but our driver told us many lived in the forests.



ELEPHANTS IN THE PERIYAR NATIONAL PARK

A VISIT TO AN ELEPHANT SANCTUARY

Beside the wild elephants we also paid a visit to an elephant sanctuary. Here the elephants have been rescued from the wild. These beasts live to around 120 but are usually rescued at an early age. While young testosterone levels are high so 9 is an average age to begin training. They need to walk miles each day to keep fit and work up an appetite so taking visitors for walks we were told is no problem. They love to bath so helping to wash them is great fun. They are given the very best diet possible and they love their mahouts. In order to keep cool they flap their ears- a little disconcerting as I was sitting high up near its head and they continually fanned me! We sat astride which was far from easy- not far off the splits!





WATERWAYS BORDERING THE ARABIAN SEA

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, COCHIN AND THE ARABIAN SEA

The beaches of Kerala are not those soft sandy beaches where you sun yourself under a sunshade and from time to time cool off in quiet azure water. They are hot but often stoney with just the occasional sand bar. The water pounds the shore line and thunders ashore and often the beach falls away steeply. It has a beauty all of its own.

Down south, In Travandrium, the states capital, we enjoyed a romantic setting beside the Arabian ocean but health and safety didn't apply! On the narrow wall the chairs and tables were inches from a 10 foot drop into the crashing ocean on one side and the palms and vegetation on the other. We were kept cool by the crashing spay but I worried about being swept away!

Our stay here was at Uday Samundra leisure beach resort. A 5 star complex that had everything. On our first morning we were greeted with a melodious mix of drums and sacred instruments at it was a hindu festival. That evening we enjoyed the energetic drumming and watched brightly coloured figures carried aloft in the parade.

During the day we visited the palace and the temple, saw rice flower fashioned into biscuits which were so hard they almost broke your teeth and watched an old woman create intricate patterns with rice flour on the pavement in front of her house to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck.



HINDU FESTIVAL AT UDAY SAMUNDRA LEISURE BEACH RESORT



In Cochin, the financial centre, the Chinese fishing nets at Fort Kochi are its most famous beach attraction. Today they offer tourists a glimpse of the past but they catch few fish. Quantities come shore instead in the early morning and evening caught by the fisherman further off shore. Nothing is more enjoyable than joining the hustle and bustle as they are landed and bought by the stall holders who cook them for you by the harbour side. The whole area is also itself filled with many interesting places to visit as it is steeped in colonial history.

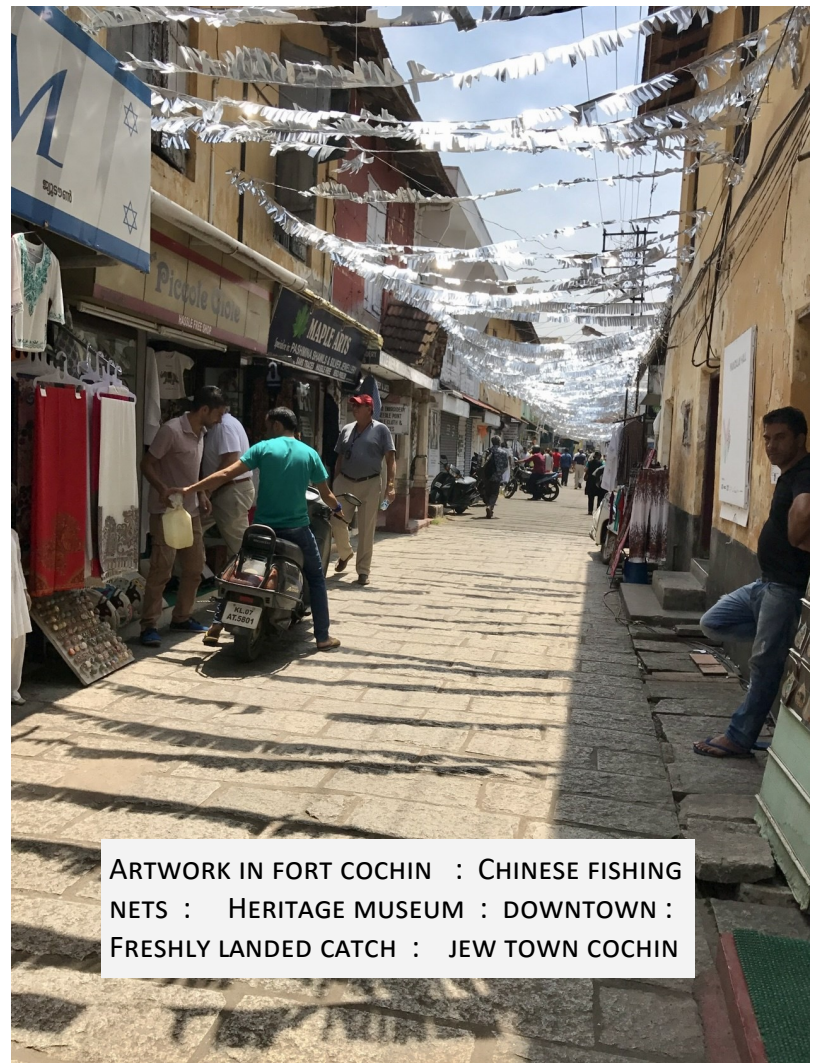
HERITAGE

Kerala wins hands down on scenery but its people also excite and leave a lasting impression. People of all faiths live in harmony and everyone offers a smile and a helping hand. The folklore museum in Cochin is a good place to get an insight into its rich history. It is arranged on three floors



MAKING RICE FLOUR BISCUITS

RICE FLOUR DESIGNS TO
WARD OFF EVIL SPIRITS



ARTWORK IN FORT COCHIN : CHINESE FISHING NETS : HERITAGE MUSEUM : DOWNTOWN : FRESHLY LANDED CATCH : JEW TOWN COCHIN



KATHAKALI COSTUME IN MUSEUM

FOLK DOLLS

KATHAKALI PERFORMER



and packed with exhibits. The building itself is an impressive architectural masterpiece. Inside it resembles Tutankhamun's tomb but your guide soon brings everything to life. On the second floor are the costumes of Kathakali- a fascinating tradition of music, dance, drama and mime. However this is not the resting place for a forgotten art form.

Here and through out Kerala the tradition endures and no visit is complete without enjoying a performance. The masks, headgear, make up, expressions and multi layered bizarre clothing are truly magnificent. As I sat in the front row I was mesmerised by those enormous eyes set in that brightly coloured dramatic makeup. They flashed this way and that way. Almost scary and very intimidating. Like the backwaters and the ever changing scenery they are memories that will endure for a long time.

When to go

The region has three specific seasons. December, January & February are cooler and drier, yet busier, March, April & May are hot and humid. The rest of the year is the southwest and northeast monsoon season.

Visas

You can travel on an tourist visa but

be sure to use the official government site to avoid being fleeced.

<https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/visa/tvoa.html>

Exchange rate

Don't think you can't afford the best hotels and five star meals. The exchange rate puts everything within your grasp.

Food and drink

Chinese, Italian and other Western food is available but curry is available everywhere. Even McDonalds burgers taste of curry ! Although considered a 'dry state,' beer and alcohol are available. Drink bottled water

Touring

We went with 'The 'Travel Planners'. Who gave us an excellent experience Email: anish@ttpkerala.com. www.keralatourpackages.com. Great tailor made tours in air conditioned cars.

Festivals

All faiths live in harmony, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic. There are many festivals and feast days so be sure to involve yourself in at least one- even if its 'no moon' day!