

Kerala



Overview

Kerala is a region in Southern India that is beautiful, diverse, affluent and fascinating. Each resort that I visited was completely different to the last. The harbour in Cochin offers hustle bustle. There's an abundance of markets and shops to haggle in, hotels and restaurants are plentiful, the harbour itself has spectacular views of the Chinese fishing nets, especially at sunset, and the locals wave and say hello rather than beg and pester for money. The roads are stuffed with cycles, tuc-tuc's, goats, chickens, motorbikes carrying entire families and ladies carrying vats of water on their heads. Everyone is dressed in saris and sarongs in the brightest colours and it feels safe to walk around day or night. The Tiger Reserve in Periyar couldn't be more opposite. The lush jungle is bursting with fruit trees, vibrant giant flowers and wildlife from deer to monkeys. It is a peaceful eco friendly place where TV's can't be found in the wonderful traditional hotels and the only sound that can be heard at night is the crickets singing. The backwaters of Kerala are perhaps the most famous attraction and the perfect way to explore them is by boat. You can opt to spend a night on one or simply stay at one of the fabulous hotels on the backwaters and take a boat out for the day. The beach at Marari is the perfect place to end a tour of Kerala. Think wide, sweeping beach stretching as far as the eye can see. Then imagine lying in a hammock and raising a flag when you're ready for your next drink. The service is wonderful everywhere, as are the people, the hotels, the food and the experiences you will have.

Kerala is accessed from either Cochin or Trivandrum airport. Flights from the UK are via Mumbai with airlines such as Jet Airways. Jet Airways is an Indian airline who won the award for best economy airline in 2011. Seat back screens are featured in all classes and the choice of entertainment is very generous. Business Class offers flat beds, while First Class offers suites that not only lay flat, but can also be shut off from the rest of the cabin.

I took my tour with the tour operator TransIndus, who specialize in India. If you want a tour with an excellent English speaking and knowledgeable guide, the best hotels, the best meals and the best excursions, this is the Company to travel with.

Flight time to Mumbai: 8½ hours

Flight time to Cochin: 2½ hours

Airline: Jet Airways. Jet are an Indian based airline, last year they won an award for best economy airline. Both Business Class & First Class have flat beds. All classes have seat back screens. You will need to collect bags at Mumbai airport in order to clear customs. There is a lot of security checks, so I recommend allowing 3 hours for a connection. You will not need to collect your bags on the return flight.

Time difference: 4½ hours ahead

Health & vaccinations: Low risk of malaria. Speak to your GP regarding injections

Currency: Indian Rupee's are prohibited currency and cannot be taken out of or into the Country. They are easily obtained at Mumbai and Cochin airport. It is best to carry cash as there aren't many cash points around, even in Cochin. There are none in Marari. Sterling can be exchanged for rupees at a hotel concierge. The exchange rate in May 2012 is 80 rupees to £1.00.

Best time of year to visit: January – March. I visited in mid May which is on the cusp of monsoon season, this lasts until the end of June. In May it was humid and sunny and the temperature was around 35 degrees most days. However, the sun sets early at 6.30 and we were lucky to only experience a little rain.

Plug adaptor: European style fits and works well

Visa's: Required for British passport holders and must be completed online. This is time consuming therefore, you must allow an evening to do this. The Embassy require 6 weeks to process visas so allow plenty of time for your application and ensure that you won't need your passport in the meantime. If you have Pakistani relatives or if you are a writer speak to the Embassy about obtaining a visa. The cost of a single entry visitor visa is currently £42.20 plus any checking service you may choose to use. You will need 2 photos the sizes of which are explained on the website. They can't be obtained from a photo booth but Snappy Snaps or Kodak will be able to help.



Cochin

We flew into Cochin and spent 2 nights here which is sufficient time to explore this area. Cochin is a Harbour which is famous for the Chinese fishing nets, the only other place in the world these can be seen is in China itself. The best way to view them is from a boat on a sunset cruise. Jew Town is particularly good for shopping. There are shops selling fabrics and other souvenirs and there is ample opportunity to try a little haggling. The locals are friendly and everyone speaks English. They aren't pushy and there is no begging. Kerala is one of the more affluent regions of Kerala and it feels very safe to walk around. The cost of living in Cochin is very cheap. Lunch at a local pizzeria costs just 200R (£2.50) There is also a tour you can do of the town which includes a trip to St Francis Church, the Dutch Palace and Kumbalangi village.

Brunton Boatyard is a beautiful colonial hotel which is just a 5 minute walk to the Chinese fishing nets. The room choices here are standard rooms or suites. Standard rooms are a generous size and have a balcony. Request a room on a higher floor as this allows a better view over the harbour. Guests should be pre warned that ships pass in all hours of the night and it isn't uncommon for them to sound their horns. If you find this intrusive the hotel provides ear plugs. The service here and at most places throughout Kerala can be a little slow. Staff couldn't be friendlier, they can't do enough for you and speak very good English, but don't expect to grab a quick breakfast or check out in a rush. Breakfast at Brunton Boatyard is A La Carte and guests should allow the best part of an hour for this.



An alternative choice of hotel in Cochin is the Malabar House. It is in town and so is even closer to the Chinese Fishing nets than Brunton Boatyard. They have an upstairs bar and an excellent restaurant and outdoor seating area. Guests should again ask for a room on a higher floor to avoid the possibility of having a room overlooked by the restaurant.

Periyar

It takes 5 hours to drive from Cochin to Periyar, but there is a break in the journey half way where we stopped at a rubber plantation for lunch. Guests are offered a guided tour of the pineapple groves, banana and rubber tree's before enjoying a meal outside in the sun. Once in Periyar there is the opportunity to see elephants, ride them and even bathe them. The other attraction of staying in Periyar is the treks you can take through the Jungle. The walks start early at 6.30 to avoid the heat of the day. It isn't a flat walk, but you don't need to be particularly fit to partake. The treks generally take you past a village, giving you the opportunity to meet the locals and see how they live. On the walk itself it isn't uncommon to see monkeys, deer and other wildlife.

Periyar is described as a Tiger Reserve, but it's important to point out how misleading this is. Although there is a Tiger Reserve deep in the jungle, the chance of actually seeing any are virtually none. There is no trip or safari you can take to see them and there are no other tiger viewing options in Kerala. Clients wanting to see tigers need to head to central India, to places such as Rajasthan.

I spent two nights at the Shalimar Spice Garden <http://shalimarspicegarden.com>. Sometimes an international brand hotel can lack in local feel and traditional decor and make you feel like you could be staying anywhere in the world, but this isn't the case at the Shalimar Spice Village. It is one of the best hotels I have ever stayed in. Its Indian decor and exotic grounds are beautiful. The entrance to the hotel is a sweeping staircase down through lush gardens, exotic flowers and jack fruit trees. The rooms are in blocks staggered on a hill behind the main building. Standard rooms have open air showers, but those who aren't keen on this can opt for the cottages as they have enclosed bathrooms with glass doors overlooking private gardens. There is an infinity pool, lounge area and outdoor breakfast area. It is an eco lodge so don't expect to find a TV in the room.



There are a handful of other hotel options in this area. The Spice Village is also an eco lodge and a similar alternative <http://www.cghearthhotels.com/spice-village>.

The Lake Palace hotel <http://www.lakepalacethekkady.com/gallery.php#> is very colonial in style and very remote, it can only be accessed by boat. It's an ideal location for viewing wild deer and elephant herds.

For something completely different book a stay at Mayapott the 'Mystical Point' <http://www.mayapott.com/index.htm> This is a villa in the middle of a plantation villa and has just 3 rooms. This is the one to choose if you want the intimate atmosphere of a home stay, but with excellent meals, a choice of activities, a spa and also a swimming pool which is due to open soon.

The Backwaters

The backwaters of Kerala are a network of canals and rivers that in places are so wide you could be looking out to sea. This is a very peaceful and green area, not too dissimilar from the Nile in Egypt. You can expect a host of activities in some parts, from women washing their clothes and children splashing about, to fishermen swimming past with their spears. Two nights in this resort will be sufficient time to enjoy it and there are some excellent hotels to choose from.

The Kamarakom Lake resort is part of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group and is needless to say the best hotel in this area. Anyone thinking of taking a tour of Kerala for their honeymoon should include a stay here. Consider booking a room with shared pool as these are more attractive than those with a private pool. I had lunch here and can recommend the food, which is very reasonably priced for a 5* hotel with an average cost of 600R for a meal (£7.50).

I stayed at the Coconut Lagoon which is a very private eco resort that can only be accessed by boat. This is perhaps the reason why Paul McCartney stayed here recently. It is very colonial in design and there are several room types to choose from. I stayed in a Mansion Villa. There tend to be three or four in a row and have a shared terrace, but they are very private. There is a lounge and open air bathroom downstairs and a bed upstairs. Standard rooms however are just as nice and also have open air showers.

Seafood is the main choice throughout Kerala and there is a speciality restaurant at the Coconut Lagoon which serves excellent seafood.



Akkarakalam Memoirs is a large restored farmhouse in Alleppey <http://www.akkarakalammemoirs.com/> It is a little more basic than the other hotel options on the Backwaters, but a comfortable choice if you are looking for a home away from home.

I then took a private rice boat on a cruise along the backwaters to the shopping resort of Alleppey. Alleppey is worth a day trip if you want to see a typical Indian town. The roads are busy, there are fruit sellers everywhere and lining the rooftops of the department stores are Hindu monuments. Department stores sell mostly saris, but this is also a great opportunity to pick up souvenirs. Expect to pay around £2.00 for a set of children's pyjamas and £3.50 for a scarf. The journey there takes 4 hours and there are a variety of boats to choose from, from the very comfortable to the very luxurious.

Marari

The Marari Beach resort is the ideal place to finish and unwind from your tour <http://www.cghearth.com/marari-beach> You can spend a few nights lounging on the beach or relaxing by the pool. There are no private beaches in India, therefore the sun beds aren't on the sand but on the grassy knoll in front of it. Guests are given a flag to raise when they want a drink. The sea can be rough and is sometimes unsuitable for swimming. The lifeguard is based here and will indicate when it is safe to enter the water.

Marari Beach Resort is a very good hotel on Marari beach. Standard rooms are very private and are dotted in blocks which are spread throughout the grounds. They have open air bathrooms and also a porch with fan. Perfect for sitting on with a cup of tea in the mornings.



For the ultimate in privacy head to the Beach Symphony instead <http://www.abeachsymphony.com/>
These villas are next door to the Marari Beach Resort villas and are on the beach

Holidays to India have a stigma attached to them. They can conjure up images of begging, poverty, sickness and crowds, but this isn't necessarily the case. Kerala is a very gentle introduction to India that will leave you pleasantly surprised. It can easily be combined with time in the North to see the Taj Mahal, but it is well worth a visit in its own right, plus you have the opportunity to relax on a beach at the end of a busy tour. Give me a call if I can help further.

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