



JOURNEY THROUGH KERALA: BIKES, HIKES and BOATS



This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day-to-day. It doesn't hope to answer everything. If you have any questions please get in touch.



On the backwaters. Photo Paul Nixon

- **Original itinerary, rich & colourful, 'off the beaten track'**
- **Hike above the tea estates in the Cardamom Hills**
- **Backwater boat trip & golden beaches**
- **Wildlife park: elephant, wild boar, flying squirrels, fish eagles.....**
- **A memorable & authentic experience in a wonderful climate**

India

High Places began in India in 1987 when our very first trip set off to trek in the Garhwal Himalayas in north India. We have gradually widened our destinations and now also go to Ladakh, Sikkim and Kerala. If you are looking for an authentic and active holiday in India, we are the specialists. Moreover we continue to hold India in great respect and have a deep regard for the land and its peoples. To travel with High Places here will disprove many of the myths you might hold and leave you with a sense of wonder and incredulity. There is a life-force in India which we may already have lost in the west. You must go and see for yourself.

Kerala

Kerala is a special place. Its landscape is indisputably beautiful - a green and luxuriant strip of land backed by mountains, fringed with surf, rich in spice plantations and coconut palms, relaxed and tranquil under the tropical sun. But it is more than that. The first freely elected socialist society in the world, Kerala now claims the highest standards of health care, the highest literacy rate and land ownership in the entire developing world.

Transport

For most of the trip we have a private bus. On the backwaters we use our own private boat.

Biking

We use Indian 'ATB' (all terrain bikes). These have no gears but the roads are mainly flat and the activity pleasurable. There will be a vehicle to carry luggage but it will keep a low profile. Helmets are not provided – please bring your own if you wish to cycle.

NB: Due to a recent increase in traffic on some of our usual biking routes, some of the coastal cycling legs are under review and the cycling there will remain flexible.

Language and religion

There are 14 major languages in India and around 200 minor languages and dialects. Malayalam is the spoken language in Kerala. It came as a shock to discover that our hard-learned Hindi was virtually useless here. English is often spoken but is not as widespread as in other parts of India. Over 25% of the population is Christian, with Hinduism and Islam being the other main religions in this largely tolerant pluralistic society. An often surprising characteristic of Kerala are the white, Christian churches which are to be seen everywhere. Every school seems to be called 'St George's' or 'St Boniface' and buses and lorries bear large names 'Jesus Christ' or 'Holy Mary'.

Accommodation

On this trip all of the places we stay are friendly and with character, and in diverse locations. A comfortable guesthouse in Cochin, Indian rest houses, a 'Raj' type club/hotel, a cultural and craft ashram and a traditional Indian guesthouse. There will be surprises, most of them good, and the variety of accommodation adds spice (sic) to our travels which for the most part are off any tourist circuit. All accommodation is double or twin share unless a single supplement has been confirmed.

Climate

Kerala is tropical and the climate, moderated by sea breezes, is wonderful. The most comfortable months are from November to March when daytime temperatures are around 30° C (warm) with balmy evenings. With the added altitude, the hills are cooler and chill mists sometimes sweep in dramatically. By January there is virtually no rainfall. On some of our trips we have had unbroken sunshine every day. Short sharp tropical rainstorms are always a possibility.



Fishermen hauling nets photo Paul Nixon

Food

Most days all meals are included. On a few days we provide bed and breakfast only. This allows you the option of trying a wide range of local restaurants which is very much part of the adventure. See day to day itinerary for details of which meals are included. We try to advise on eating tips in towns and the group often decides to eat together. Cuisine in Kerala is delicious. Vegetables and fish spiced with pepper, turmeric, cardamom and ginger, tempered with coconut milk and yoghurts make for many memorable meals during the trip. And the masala dosas!!

Health and hygiene

We have an excellent record of staying fit and well in India. The key seems to be our enthusiasm for Indian vegetarian food (most of India is vegetarian) and care with water, avoiding salads, and keeping hands clean.

Tipping

It is custom and practice to tip in India. You should perhaps allow the equivalent of around £30-£40/NZ\$80-100pp. Try to avoid giving gifts or cash to children or anyone who has not rendered a service.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

This itinerary is flexible and should be seen as a guide only. Local conditions, weather or fitness could lead to changes in our daily plans. All times and distances are approximate. 'B,L,D' refers to meals included in the trip cost, i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

DAY 1 Arrive Cochin and transfer to our accommodation at Fort Cochin, the site of historic palaces, churches, an ancient Jewish synagogue and architecture reflecting the visits of Portuguese, British and Dutch traders. Guesthouse.

DAY 2 Cochin is a diverse and colourful port/city, spreading over 4-5 islands and peninsulas. The main town of Ernakulam is on the mainland. All the islands are connected by a ferryboat network and therein lies the charm of an exploratory two days here. Around the headland of Fort Cochin, a phalanx of cantilevered Chinese fishing boats dip into the sea at high tide. In its back streets, there is an aroma of ginger, cardamom and other spices, piled high in every nook and cranny. Guesthouse. (B)

DAY 3 Inland now, and after the coastal heat, more familiar English summer temperatures, and a landscape of rolling hills, tea, coffee, rubber plantations and mist-covered valleys and woods. Munnar is the centre of the surrounding tea industry and in some ways has changed little since pre-independence. Beyond the tea plantations, the mountains rise to over 2500m. It is not unlike the English Lake District but with more forest and less lakes. The main difference however is that apart from High Places groups, virtually no-one walks here! Club/hotel. (B,L,D)

DAYS 4-5 We have a choice of mountain walks depending on the weather and changing restrictions. One option is to climb Chokran Mudi (2179m), which takes us through forestry and tea plantations onto a high granite ridge with dramatic views of the Western Ghats and beyond, over mountains and ridges into Tamil Nadu. This is the toughest day on the trip, approx. 5-6 hours with some effort required, but the views on top will be ample reward. Look out for eagles and kites and maybe tiger or bison droppings, though we will be far too noisy for a close encounter with either of the latter!

Our other route is easier, in the Parvatti Hills. Pleasant and varied, it starts in the tea plantations and leads through forest inhabited by lion-tailed macaque monkeys and onto a broad grassy ridge which is often shaded by trees. From the top, Animudi (Elephant Mountain, 2694m) and Chokran Mudi look spectacular. Club/hotel. (B,L,D)



PYO tea at Munnar photo Paul Deacon

Note: The walking in the Munnar area is subject to change due to forestry and national park restrictions which have a tendency to limit access at short notice.

DAYS 6-7 A drive over rolling hills and coffee plantations to Periyar wildlife sanctuary with the chance of seeing Indian elephants, wild boars, lion-tailed monkeys, ibex, tigers,

leopards and sloth bears as well as great hornbills, kites, darters, herons, egrets, owls and kingfishers. Guesthouse. (B,L,D)

DAY 8 To the backwaters. A drive past rice-fields, banana, tapioca, rubber and coffee plantations to Alleppy where we are transferred to a tranquil riverside guesthouse referred to in a postcard sent Dec 2006: "*Just arrived in paradise* " On one visit here we watched a local man fish with a bow and arrow. Guesthouse. (B,L,D)

DAY 9 Walk to the local village or the temple, or the Karumadikuttan Bhudda statue, or take to the backwaters by rowing boat or canoe. It is near here that we received instruction in climbing coconut palms by some friendly villagers. (Not too successful though!) Guesthouse. (B,L,D)



Fishing on the backwaters

DAY 10 Our boat arrives and we spend the morning on the backwaters cruising down to Chengannur. The term 'backwaters' refers to the extensive network of rivers, lakes, canals and lagoons that lace the coastal plain interior coastline and stretch from Cochin almost down to Trivandrum.

A short distance away (10km) is Aranmula, set amid rice fields and coconut palms, home to a dance and arts centre. The centre was set up by a French woman who recognised that without an arts and cultural programme based in South India, many of the old traditional dramatic, musical and martial arts risked dying out. To be an accomplished Kathakali dancer or to engage in Kalaripayat at a high level takes many years of dedicated study, and this visit allows us a glimpse of another world. We stay nearby, in simple Indian style accommodation. (B,L,D)

DAY 11 An early morning bike ride whets the appetite for breakfast. The centre offers a variety of workshops on dance, drumming, music, wood-carving, Kalaripayat, the martial art of South India and yoga – our participation will depend on the current schedule. If you prefer, local walks or biking are also options. We may be invited to watch the elaborate Kathakali make-up being painted on the evening's dance performers. A speciality at the centre is Kerala-style vegetarian food served on banana leaves, delicately prepared and delicious. (B,L,D)

DAY 12 After breakfast we set off for the coast, driving through remote villages and along rural lanes until we reach the Arabian Sea. Those who wish may opt to switch to bikes and cycle along the coast past beaches with rolling waves and fishermen hauling nets to reach the town of Varkala, home to an important Hindu temple and bathing ghat, and visited by pilgrims travel from afar. Varkala's beautiful beaches also bring the pressures of tourism to the town. We stay in a simple guesthouse with delicious delicately prepared Kerala food. (B,L,D)

DAY 13 An early morning bike ride while its still fairly cool to a small hilltop temple, then the rest of the day is free to swim in the Arabian Sea, relax on the beach, visit the town, or perhaps have a massage. (B,L,D)

DAY 14 A final wake up in paradise! Transfer to Trivandrum for the international flight – OR to Kovalam. (B)

Kovalam extension

DAY 14 see above.

DAY 15 Kovalam.

DAY 16 Transfer to Trivandrum Airport and depart.

What our clients say

“This was a very happy holiday for us in every way. The leaders were sensitive to everyone’s individual needs and were always approachable and well informed. We had a group who got on well together which made the interactions fun and the shared experiences more interesting. The varied experiences suited us so well and we loved the eclectic accommodation - please think about exploring possibilities for trips like this in other areas...”

Roger & Jennifer Marston Journey through Kerala Feb 08

ML 10/08



Biking by the Arabian Sea photo Janice Reynolds