

NEW EXCLUSIVE TOUR FOR JUST 18 PARTICIPANTS

PASSAGE THROUGH KERALA

AN ESCORTED TOUR OF KERALA
INCLUDING SEVEN NIGHTS ALONG THE BACKWATERS
ABOARD THE MV VAIKUNDAM

23RD JANUARY TO 6TH FEBRUARY
& 6TH FEBRUARY TO 20TH FEBRUARY 2025



NOBLE CALEDONIA

We are delighted to offer this new escorted tour to India's beautiful southern state of Kerala which with its stunning array of attractions is known as "God's Own Country". Kerala offers a much slower pace than the crowded North and is the perfect choice for first time visitors to India as well as those rediscovering this beguiling country and looking to experience life beyond the well-trodden paths. Over the course of two weeks we will take an in-depth look at this remarkable region with its sleepy backwaters, leafy coastlines, national parks, tranquil rural villages, sprawling tea gardens and spice plantations.

Beginning in Cochin we will explore this bustling port where synagogues, mosques, churches and temples sit side by side and learn about Kerala's multi-layered past with its mix of Arab, Portuguese and Dutch influences. Continuing on to Thekaddy we spend a full day in the Western Ghats at Periyar National Park where during our safari we hope to spot wild elephants, deer and perhaps even the elusive Bengal tiger, and we will learn of the centuries-old spice trade at a plantation. The next seven days will be spent exploring Kerala's labyrinthine network of waterways, the Backwaters, with the 18-guest MV Vaikundam providing our comfortable base. Relax and watch the world go by as we travel between villages visiting temples, churches, marketplaces, paddy fields, beaches and boat building yards along the way. We can witness the laid back and peaceful lives of the villagers occupied with coir making, fishing and shell harvesting and marvel as coconut pickers nimbly scale the tall palms.

Our tour has been designed to get beneath the surface of Kerala enabling you to be immersed in the local culture, crafts and cuisine. Whilst not forgoing comfort, you can expect an authentic experience aboard the MV Vaikundam with a relatively modest standard of accommodation. The guided tours will be immersive including visits to workshops and schools, and the food will be tasty local cuisine but with limited options. You will witness remarkable landscapes, enjoy enlightening experiences and wonderful hospitality all of which combine to make the perfect tour for the intrepid traveller to the region.





Elephant and sambar, Periyar National Park



Fishing nets, Cochin



Kathakali dancers



Church in Kumarakom

THE ITINERARY

Day 1 London or Manchester to Cochin, India. Fly by scheduled indirect flight.

Day 2 Cochin. Arrive today in Cochin, a bustling multicultural port city where synagogues, mosques, churches and temples sit side by side. The city became an important centre for spices in the 14th century with local merchants trading in black pepper and cardamom with the Arabs, Dutch, Portuguese and Chinese. On arrival we transfer to the Brunton Boatyard Hotel and the remainder of the day and evening is free to acclimatise.

Day 3 Cochin. Spend the morning on a walking tour of Mattancherry, the bustling part of Old Fort Cochin and the epicentre of the spice trade for centuries. Mattancherry is also home to a small Jewish community whose origin dates back nearly 2,000 years, during the period of King Solomon. Our touring today reveals Kochi's multi-layered past, a rich brew of Arab, Portuguese, British, and Dutch influences. We begin with the Dutch Palace and St Francis Church, India's first European church (ca. 1510), famed as the original burial site of Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama who died in Kochi in 1524. We conclude our day with a visit to the picturesque Chinese fishing nets unique to Cochin. (B, L, D)

Day 4 Cochin to Thekkady. Depart today for Thekkady (approx. four hours), home to a lush landscape of spice plantations and tea gardens. Kerala history is closely linked with its commerce, which in turn was wholly dependent until recent times on its spice trade. Kerala was known for its spices and traders travelled here to trade and to gain control over this rich land. En-route we stop at the small laidback town of Kottayam and stroll along Meenachil River where we can visit the old churches, 'Cheriyapalli (means small Church)', 'Valiyapalli (means main Church)', and an ancient mosque. After lunch we continue our journey to Thekkady and check in to the Spice Village Hotel with a chance to relax before dinner. (B, L, D)

Day 5 Periyar National Park. After an early breakfast we explore the Periyar National Park where we will use local boats to see the wild animals in their natural habitat. Periyar Tiger Reserve is part of the World Heritage Site "Western Ghats" under UNESCO and is well known for its unique and diverse flora and fauna which includes Indian elephant, Bengal tiger, sambar, gaur, leopard, Indian wild dog, barking deer, mouse deer, monitor lizards and a variety of birds and reptile species. After our safari we will take lunch at the resort and this afternoon is free to relax or maybe join the in-house naturalist to see the amazing flora, fauna and eco activities that are carried out at the resort. You will also be shown around the organic farm where you can experience vegetables being harvested. (B, L, D)

Day 6 Kerala Spice Plantation. This morning we will visit a neighbouring spice plantation and cardamom grading centre. The naturalist guide and planter will walk us through the plantation providing details on the flora and fauna whilst the scent of the spices mingles with the fresh mountain air. This is the starting point of the centuries-old spice trade and that delicious flavour which makes such a difference to foods worldwide. Return to the hotel for lunch and this evening you can join an interactive cooking demonstration with the resort's chef to learn how to cook with these local spices. (B, L, D)

Day 7 Thekkady to Alleppey. Drive this morning to Alleppey (approx. four hours) where we board the RV Vaikundam. Arriving in time for a traditional lunch on board we will have a chance to relax as we begin our journey cruising the backwaters. This afternoon we will drop anchor at Kanjippadam, where we can explore the village before visiting the boat building yard. Here we learn about the traditional method of wooden boat building of joining wooden planks with coir, cotton, and a natural resin known as Kettuvallom. (B, L, D)

Day 8 Mannar, Karumadi & Thottappalli. After breakfast, we will board a vehicle for the short drive to visit an ancient sacred grove. The sacred groves are patches of green eco-systems which shelter exotic flora, and fauna, including snakes and other reptiles. Kerala people consider snakes as messengers of mythical and divine serpents, and therefore sacred groves are revered as places of worship of serpents. The divinity of sacred groves is preserved by performing appropriate rituals regularly and they are protected by the local communities from being encroached or destroyed. Later we continue to the ancient village Mannar which is famous for its bell metal craft. Visiting a workshop we can see the casting of traditional lamps, bells and cauldrons using fine clay found on the banks of the waterways. Return to the boat for lunch as we sail to the quaint village Karumadi. We will take a walk around a small shrine preserving the ruins of a sculpture of Buddha that dates back to the 11th century, made of solid black granite. We will overnight in Thottappalli where we can take an evening walk to the beach. (B, L, D)

Day 9 Thottappalli & Changankari. After breakfast we will enjoy a leisurely walk in the village before we plant a sapling of coconut. The coconut tree is considered as 'Kalpavriksha' or the divine tree of Kerala because all of its parts are useful in one way or another: the water inside is a healthy drink; the fresh kernel and the oil extract from dried kernel are inevitable components of South Indian cuisine; fibre from the coconut husk is used to make coir, mats and geotextile; the palm fronds are used for thatching roof; the wood is suitable for making furniture and all the dried parts of coconut make good firewood. Last, but not least, the toddy and alcoholic beverage is made from the tree sap. The rest of the day is spent cruising and we will have an informative lecture by an Ayurveda doctor to learn about this



Great Indian Hornbill, Western Ghats

Kalaripayattu



Kumarakom



St. Mary Forane Church, Alleppey

5,000-year old science of life. This evening we drop anchor in the remote village of Changankari. (B, L, D)

Day 10 Changankari, Champakkulam & Mankompu. Drive this morning to Aranmula, famous for its unique metal mirrors. The technical know-how behind the making of these mirrors, whose distinct feature is 100% reflection, is confined to only some households of master craftsmen. These mirrors are unique to this region and are yet to be replicated anywhere else in the world. Later visit the ancient temple of Lord Krishna, Aranmula Sree Parthasarthy Temple. After lunch at a beautiful house of a local family, situated along the bank of Pampa River, we continue our cruise to Champakkulam which was settled more than 1,000 years ago by Syrian Christian traders, who later converted to Roman Catholicism under the Portuguese. We will visit St Mary's Church, one of the oldest churches in Kerala, which is believed to be one of the seven established by St Thomas in 427 AD. (B, L, D)

Day 11 Mankompu, Kainakari & Kavalam. Spend time cruising through the narrow canals towards Chavara Bhavan, the ancestral home of Saint Kuriakose Chavara which is now preserved as a museum. Saint Chavara, the first canonized Catholic male saint of Indian origin, was the co-founder of the first congregation for men, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (C.M.I.), and of a similar one for women, Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (C.M.C.) and dedicated his life to the upliftment of the poor. After lunch on board we cruise to Kavalam, where the river reverses its course and drains into Lake Vembanad. As we cruise, along the way we interact with toddy tappers working on the banks of the waterways. (B, L, D)

Day 12 Kavalam & Kumarakom. Early this morning, the keen birders can join a local boat to watch the migratory and endemic birds of Kumarakom that habitate this rich wetland ecosystem. Later this morning we visit the house of a Syrian Christian family for a hosted lunch. The house is located on an island which was made by the men of the house, by reclaiming land from Backwaters. We will have the chance to walk around the farm before our hosts prepare a traditional Syrian Christian meal and tell the story of their family, three generations of laborious men and equally strong women who supported their pioneering spirit. Return to our boat and cruise to Thanneermukkom barrage, built across Vembanad, the largest lake of Kerala, that divides the lake into two; one half with perennial salty water and the other with fresh water enriched by rivers. Relax on board, enjoying the gentle breeze, vastness and serenity of the majestic lake. (B, L, D)

Day 13 Kumarakom, Chenganda & Vaikom. Today we sail to Chenganda village where we will have an opportunity to interact with coir weavers, shell harvesters and farmers before continuing our journey to the ancient village of

Vaikom. We will take a short walk to visit the cultural centre to watch a Kathakali performance. Created over 300 years ago Kathakali originated in Kerala and combines devotion, drama, dance, music, costumes and make up into a divine experience. It retells the great stories of the past, mostly from Indian epics, and leaves one spellbound at the various intricacies involved in the performance. Every single quiver of the lips, flicker of the eyes or movement involving the fingers twirling, has great significance. Return to the ship for our farewell dinner on board. (B, L, D)

Day 14 Maradu, Nettoor & Cochin. Disembark this morning in Maradu and drive to the nearby village Nettoor to visit a Kalari – an authentic training centre for traditional martial art Kalaripayattu. This is an ancient traditional fighting system from the 12th century that originated in Kerala. The word "kalari" means battlefield and "payattu" refers to "become trained" or "to practice". Today many schools have incorporated Kalaripayattu into the curriculum to promote physical fitness and mental wellbeing. The students at the school will demonstrate the different techniques like meipayattu (physical body exercise), vadipayattu (fight using sticks), valpayattu (fight using swords) and verumkaiprayoga (bare hand exercise). Afterwards we continue to Cochin and check into the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel located near the airport. (B, L)

Day 15 Cochin to London or Manchester. Check out after breakfast and transfer to the airport for your return scheduled indirect flight. Arrive this evening.

PRICES PER PERSON

Based on double occupancy

Superior Cabin	£5995
Deluxe Cabin	£6495
Superior Cabin for sole use	£7995

PRICE INCLUDES: Economy class scheduled air travel • Two nights at the Brunton Boatyard Hotel, Cochin • Three nights at the Spice Village Hotel, Thekaddy • Seven nights aboard the MV Vaikundam on a full board basis • Overnight at the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel, Cochin • Meals as indicated (B – Breakfast, L – Lunch, D – Dinner) • Shore excursions • Gratuities • Tour Manager • Transfers • Port taxes • Airport taxes.

Not Included: Travel insurance, Indian visa.

Group Size: We are restricting the group size to just 18 participants.

NB. We have planned the itinerary to be less strenuous than most to the region, however, it will involve being on your feet for long periods and some of the tours will involve walking over uneven terrain and in hot and humid conditions. Transportation will be in simple vehicles rather than coaches.

MV VAIKUNDAM

We are delighted to have chartered the MV Vaikundam (Abode of Gods) for our scenic cruises along the emerald green Backwaters of Kerala. This vessel accommodates a maximum of just 18 guests in simple, comfortable cabins. The vessel was built in the same design as that of the traditional Kettuvallom or rice barges of the past and the crew will be sure to provide a friendly and welcoming atmosphere on board. The Sun Deck is a perfect place to observe everyday life and to immerse yourself in the wonderful surroundings and the sailing will take place during day time.



MV Vaikundam

Your Cabin/Suite

The ship has just two grades of cabin category, the eight superior cabins measure 124 square feet and the more spacious deluxe cabin measures 160 square feet. All cabins are situated on the Main Deck and equipped with en-suite bathroom with shower, wardrobe, locker, side table, kettle, mineral water, tea/coffee, mirror, slippers, toiletries and towels. The superior cabins feature twin beds with storage compartments whereas the deluxe cabin features a double bed with storage compartment.

Your Dining

Meals are always taken in an open seating arrangement to allow you to mingle with your fellow travellers and are served buffet style featuring hot and cold dishes of the tasty local cuisine. Whilst international cuisine is not offered, the heat of the dishes can be adjusted for individual palates upon request. Indian beer, wine and soft drinks are included with meals. Tea, coffee and mineral water are available without charge and complimentary bottled water can always be found in your cabin.

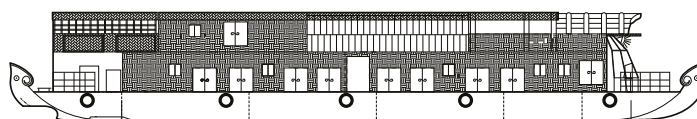
Your Space

The onboard facilities including the dining area, lounge with bar, and massage room are situated on the Upper Deck. There is air-conditioning throughout the vessel. The wooden hull of the boat has been fashioned by joining planks of local 'Aanjili' wood, using strong coir rope on the sections above the waterline while, below the waterline, copper tacks are used for added strength. The wood is coated with caustic black resin made by boiling cashew kernel and fish oil. The rooms are made using wooden panels, bamboo poles and bamboo mats, following the traditional practices.

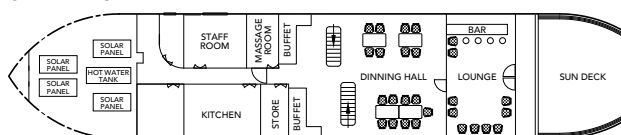


Dining and deck area

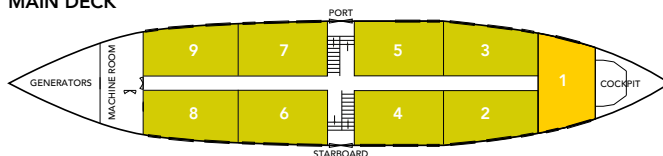
MV VAIKUNDAM DECK PLAN



UPPER DECK



MAIN DECK



■ Superior ■ Deluxe



Superior Cabin

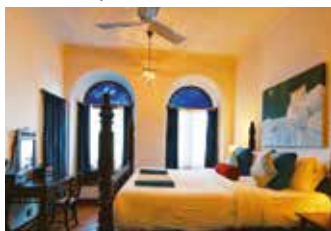
YOUR ACCOMMODATION

Brunton Boatyard, Cochin – Two nights

The Brunton Boatyard was at its peak of popularity during the middle of the 20th century and it is said that the British used the ships built here during World War II. The building has since been converted into a boutique heritage hotel whose interiors reflect an eclectic but tasteful blend of English, Portuguese and Dutch influences as seen in its high ceilings, hanging fans and a plethora of artefacts and curios. Though it is built around a garden courtyard, all 26 of the guest rooms are sea facing. Each is air-conditioned and furnished in teak with terracotta tiles with a terrace or balcony overlooking the sea. Facilities include an outdoor swimming pool, an Ayurvedic Centre offering treatments and massage and a restaurant serving an eclectic mix of cuisines. Right by the water's edge on the far northern shore of Fort Cochin, it is only a short walk from most of the town's historical attractions.



Brunton Boatyard Exterior



Deluxe Sea View Room



Lobby

Spice Village Hotel, Thekkady – Three nights

Spice Village is ideally located within the Periyar Tiger Reserve, among the rolling hills of Thekkady. Hidden beneath lush greenery, this remote village-style hotel is inspired by the jungle dwellings of the surrounding area. An ecological approach has been taken throughout the hotel and this combines with modern amenities and contemporary comforts. The comfortable cottages blend in with the natural surroundings and bring it back to nature; traditional coir mats dress the stone floors, the furniture is made from recycled light pinewood, and natural materials are used throughout the interiors. There is no air-conditioning, just the naturally cool spaces and airy porches so that one can be enveloped by the sounds and scents of the surrounding forest. Facilities include a large swimming pool, an Ayurveda centre, offering a range of relaxing traditional herbal therapies, and the Tamarind Restaurant where all the ingredients on the delicious menu are sourced from the organic garden or within a 50-mile radius.



Spice Village Cottage Exterior



Garden Cottage



Tamarind Restaurant

Courtyard by Marriott, Cochin – Overnight

Located just 300 metres from Cochin Airport, the five-star Courtyard by Marriott offers a superb service, upscale amenities and modern hotel rooms. The 106 rooms all feature ultra-comfortable beds, high-tech features, marble bathrooms, desks and complimentary Wi-Fi, as well as views of the pool or airport from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Facilities include a gym, serene spa and outdoor pool. Order 24-hour room service or indulge in one of the inviting restaurants, be it alfresco by the poolside or indoors.



Double Room



Reception area



Pool

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Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations and are available on request. Itinerary and accommodation subject to change.
Cover image: Traditional houseboats, Kerala.