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CULINARY TOUR - SOUTH INDIA

South Indian cooking (Keralan Islamic, Syrian Christian and Hindu), feasting, fruit and spice markets, forest gardens, train journey, organic farming, temples, homestays, the sea, rice-barge houseboat, cycling, ayurvedic massage, river islands; coffee plantation and more...

Sample South India culinary tour: 16 days/15 nights. Kerala

Cost: £1473 per person (based on twin share) for this South India culinary tour, excluding international flights. All our tours are private - you won't be part of a group.

The price quoted is for full board, except at Eighth Bastion in Kochi, sightseeing in Kochi and Kathakali dance, rainforest walk with one entry to Periyar Reserve, country boat cruise at Emerald Isle, all transfers from place to place, train ticket to north Kerala, cooking demos at Emerald Isle, Koshy's and Dewalokam, local hosts/guides, an English speaking Indian driver.

This is a sample South India food tour. We can mix and match according to the dates and places you would like to visit. Note that we don't arrange air flights.

Day one and two

Your arrival in the City of Kochi. Set on a cluster of islands and narrow peninsulas, Kochi is a city of cultural diversity - winding streets, shady trees, Kathakali dance, modern Indian art, 500-year old Portuguese houses, mosques, a tiny Jewish community with ancient roots - and ferry boats scuttling backwards and forwards. Once you are settled into your hotel, we can take you on our backstreet tour of the city by foot and three-wheelers, visiting the spice market, the fishing harbour and, in the evening, the city's Kathakali dance show.

Overnight (2 nights): Eighth Bastion, Fort Cochin.

Day three, four and five

We'll make our journey by train to Ayesha Manzil homestay, arriving by afternoon. The journey gives a truly 'insider's' view of the country as we travel past the backyards of homes - a mother feeding her children, clothes hung out on lines, goats grazing, boys playing cricket.



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Ayesha Manzil homestay was bought by the Moosas in 1900. The colonial bungalow combines elegance with luxury. The rooms are vast and filled with antique furniture, including large wooden beds, hand carved writing desks and reclining divans. You can take breakfast on the garden terrace overlooking the ocean and there's a cool, emerald-tiled pool for bathing.

Faiza Mooza is internationally renowned for her Mopla cuisine - Keralan Islamic cooking. The food can be very hot and spicy and is completely different to other types of Indian food. You can begin your day here with an early morning trip to the fish market and spice merchant and end it with a wonderful feast. The surrounding area is beautiful with a long, almost deserted beach nearby where you can walk off the meals.

In addition to eating and swimming, we can visit the huge cinnamon plantation (Asia's largest) founded nearly 150 years ago by the original owner of the house, Murdoch Brown; hire a bike and cycle along the coast; and watch the evening Theyyam dance rituals at Parasinikkadavu Muthappan Temple. (cooking demonstrations are available for an additional price).

Overnight: (3 nights), Ayesha Manzil homestay.

Day six, seven and eight

We will be met by the 100 year-old wooden canoe owned by Vinod and taken to his family homestay on Emerald Isle, an island of 400 homes on the Kerala backwaters. The life of the people who live here is centered on the backwaters - women pound their washing, families brush teeth, men linger at the local 'chai' shop, and canoes and ferry boats scurry by. Vinod's family is Syrian Christian. A quarter of the Christians in India come from Kerala - the majority (5 million) of whom are Syrian Christians. Their conversions took place around AD 46, and their church is Syrian Orthodox, though they have maintained many Hindu customs. Their culture and food is distinct.

You can take it easy over the next few days - reading in the hammock, dangling your toes in the water, taking massages, trying out the local tea shop and - of course - eating. Or if you're feeling more active - you can take a motorboat to visit the fruit and vegetable market; go cycling through the necklace of villages of Kuttanad; take evening walks or go bird watching through the paddy fields and homesteads; and help with cooking in the family kitchens.

Overnight: (3 nights) Emerald Isle homestay - warm family hospitality, courtyard gardens, hammock and nearby chai shop. The rice, pepper, coconut are all from



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Vinod's family farm. A quick count on our fingers, and we estimate that a stay at Emerald Isle directly supports the livelihood of over 15 families.

Day nine

You'll be picked up and taken for a night on a houseboat on Kerala's backwaters. The houseboat is a converted rice-barge. Reclining on cushions, you'll travel through the rivers and a labyrinth of man-made canals that flow through island paddy fields.

Overnight: (1 night) on-board the house boat. Lunch and dinner on board.

Day ten, eleven and twelve

We'll take the 4 hour drive to Periyar Nature Reserve and spend the next 3 days at Beaumont Plantation Retreat. Periyar is a 777 sq km forested wildlife reserve - home to bison, sambar, wild boar, Nilgiri langur, elephants and tigers. Run under the imaginative supervision of the Kerala Forest Department, it is also home to the indigenous Mannan tribal community, who help conserve the reserve in exchange for income from eco-tourism.

(note that there are entry fee charges to Periyar Reserve and extra charges for other programmes such as: Bamboo rafting, border hiking - approximately £20.00 each).

Overnight: (3 nights) Beaumont Plantation Retreat is located in Kerala near to Chellarcovil Ecotourism project and is sharing boundary with Tamil Nadu forest. Beaumont is 15 km away from Periyar tiger reserve forest Thekkady and famous for its diversity of wildlife and scenic beauty.

Day thirteen, fourteen and fifteen

After breakfast we'll make our way to Dewalokam Spice Plantation homestay, hidden amongst the trees on the farm of Prof Jose. The farm and forest gardens are managed using traditional organic farming methods. Plants and spices grown on the farm supply the vegetarian cuisine prepared for the homestay - coconut, pineapple, bananas, different types of yam, tapioca, spices such as pepper, ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon, turmeric, vanilla and other tropical fruit trees and medicinal herbs.

As guests, we'll stay with the family. Here, in this predominantly farming village, you can join the host to learn a few recipes of Central Travancore cooking, go birding (there are 80 species of birds nearby), take long walks in the countryside



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or go cycling. We can also take a quick tour of the local rubber processing facility that helps provide a living to small-scale rubber producers in the area.

Overnight: (3 nights) Spice Plantation homestay.

Day sixteen

After a farewell meal, we'll take you to the airport for your journey home.

SEASONS FOR SOUTH INDIA CULINARY TOUR

Late October until the following April are the best months for visiting. June, July and August are the monsoon months. You can still travel during monsoon season if you can put up with the rain. On the second Saturday of August each year is the famous regatta on Vembanad Lake. Scores of long 'snake boats' fill the lake, each boat crewed by up to 100 rowers. The annual event celebrates the seafaring and martial traditions of ancient Kerala.