A FREE PLANNING GUIDE

BY A LOCAL




# Kerala, unhurried.

*A first-timer's guide for international travellers — when to go, how to get around, what to eat, and where the real backwaters are.*

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**Kerala in a Coconut Shell**

Written by Mr. Coconut, from Kerala

Stay longer. See less. Feel more.

BEFORE YOU START

# Namaskaram, and welcome to Kerala.

I grew up here, and the question I get most from visitors is *"where do I even start?"* This guide is my answer. It covers what you need to plan a first trip: seasons, transport, the places worth your days, food, money and a few words of Malayalam.

One piece of advice before anything else: **do less.** Kerala rewards travellers who stay three nights instead of one. Pick fewer places, and let the slow mornings happen.

— *Mr. Coconut*

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This guide comes with videos. Look for the yellow play button and you'll find a short video on the topic at youtube.com/@KeralaCoconutShell

01

# When to go

Kerala has three seasons, not four. None of them is “wrong”. Each one just changes what the trip looks like.

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

## Cool & dry

October – March

The classic window and the busiest. Clear skies, calm seas, comfortable evenings in the hills. Some showers in October–November from the northeast monsoon. Book **Christmas to New Year** early; prices peak.

## Hot & humid

April – May

Sticky on the coast, pleasant in Munnar and Wayanad. Fewer visitors, lower rates, and mango season. Plan the plains for early mornings and spend afternoons in the hills or the shade.

## Monsoon

June – September

My favourite, honestly. Everything turns impossibly green, waterfalls are at full force, and it’s the traditional season for Ayurveda. Expect heavy downpours, rough seas, and the occasional landslide warning in the hills. Keep a buffer day.

**TIP** Some parks close seasonally. Eravikulam (Munnar) shuts for a few weeks around **February–March** for Nilgiri tahr calving. Check official dates before you build a trip around it.

02

# Getting around

Kerala is long and narrow, about 600 km top to bottom. Distances look short on a map, but roads are slow. Budget time, not kilometres.

## FOUR AIRPORTS

**COK**
**Kochi**
Central. Best for most first trips.

**TRV**
**Thiruvananthapuram**
South. Varkala, Kovalam.

**CCJ**
**Kozhikode**
North. Gateway to Wayanad.

**CNN**
**Kannur**
Far north. Theyyam country.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Trains** | Run along the coast and link most cities. Cheap, scenic, social. Book on IRCTC; there's a foreign tourist quota. |
| **KSRTC buses** | State buses go everywhere, including the hills. Very cheap. Not fast. |
| **Auto-rickshaws** | For short hops. Ask for the meter, or agree the fare *before* you get in. |
| **Cab apps** | Work well in Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. Patchy elsewhere. |
| **Car + driver** | The easy way to do Munnar and Thekkady. Hire by the day; the driver's stay is usually included. |
| **Ferries** | Public ferries in Alappuzha and Kochi's Water Metro. The cheapest backwater ride there is. |

## ROUGH ROAD TIMES

Kochi → Alappuzha
**~1.5 h**

Kochi → Munnar
**~4 h**

Munnar → Thekkady
**~3 h**

Alappuzha → Varkala
**~3 h**

03

# Where to go

Eight places, from north to south. On a first trip, choose three or four. The rest will still be here next time.

### Kannur & Bekal
North · 2 nights

Empty beaches, a seaside fort and Theyyam, the ritual dance performed in village shrines.

### Thrissur
Central · 1 night

Kerala's cultural capital. Temple festivals, and the Athirappilly falls an hour away.

### Munnar
Hills · 2 nights

Rolling tea estates, cool mornings, Eravikulam park and the Nilgiri tahr.

### Alappuzha & Kumarakom
Backwaters · 2 nights

Canals, paddy fields and houseboats. See page 7 for how to do it well.

### Wayanad
Hills · 2–3 nights

Coffee estates, forest trails and the Edakkal Caves' ancient rock carvings.

### Fort Kochi
Central · 2–3 nights

Fishing nets, colonial lanes, Mattancherry's spice markets and the old synagogue. Walk everywhere.

### Thekkady
Hills · 1–2 nights

Periyar Tiger Reserve, spice gardens and guided jungle walks.

### Varkala
South · 2–3 nights

Red cliffs above the beach. A slow place to end the trip, close to TRV airport.

**Watch: see these places before you choose**
The Kerala playlist on YouTube · youtube.com/@KeralaCoconutShell

04

# Three ways to do it

All three start in Kochi. Numbers are nights. If you're short on time, drop a place rather than squeezing it in.

## 7 days · the classic loop

Fly in & out of COK

Fort Kochi · 2 | Munnar · 2 | Alappuzha · 2 | Kochi · 1

City, hills and water in one week. Do the houseboat or a canal canoe on the last full day, then it's just 1.5 hours back to the airport.

## 10 days · hills to the sea

In COK, out TRV

Fort Kochi · 2 | Munnar · 2 | Thekkady · 1 | Kumarakom · 2 | Varkala · 2

Adds wildlife and spice gardens, then three slow days by the water. Varkala is under an hour from Thiruvananthapuram airport.

## 14 days · the unhurried one

In CCJ, out TRV

Wayanad · 3 | Fort Kochi · 3 | Munnar · 2 | Thekkady · 2 | Alappuzha · 1 | Varkala · 2

North to south, with the train between Kozhikode and Kochi. Three nights in Fort Kochi is when it stops feeling like a stopover.

**TIP** Arriving on a long-haul flight? Make the first night an easy one in Kochi, not a 4-hour drive up to Munnar.

05

# Backwaters & houseboats

A houseboat isn't the only way onto the water, and often it isn't the best one. The narrow canals, where village life actually happens, are too small for big boats.

CHEAPEST

### Public ferry

The state ferry from Alappuzha to Kottayam takes about 2.5 hours through the backwaters for very little money. Locals, schoolkids, no commentary.

MY PICK

### Canoe or shikara

Small boats reach the narrow canals. Go early morning for birds and mist. Two to three hours is plenty.

HALF THE PRICE

### Day cruise

A houseboat from late morning to late afternoon, lunch on board. All the scenery without the overnight cost.

THE CLASSIC

### Overnight houseboat

Boarding around noon, meals cooked on board. Boats must moor in the evening, so most of the cruising happens in the afternoon.

## BEFORE YOU BOOK A HOUSEBOAT

1. Ask whether it's **government-registered** and has life jackets on board.
2. Confirm what's included: meals, AC hours (often night only) and the route.
3. Prefer quieter water? Look at Kumarakom or Munroe Island instead of central Alappuzha.
4. Peak-season weekends book out. Reserve a few weeks ahead, directly if you can.

**Watch: what a backwater day actually looks like**
On the channel · youtube.com/@KeralaCoconutShell

06

# What to eat

Coconut, curry leaf, rice and fish, cooked a hundred ways. The best meals are in small local restaurants, confusingly called “hotels”.

### Appam & stew
Lacy rice pancakes with a mild coconut-milk stew. The perfect first breakfast.

### Sadya
A vegetarian feast of a dozen-plus dishes on a banana leaf. Best at Onam.

### Malabar biryani
Fragrant short-grain rice, gentler than the northern kind. Go to Kozhikode for it.

### Fish curry meals
Red rice, sambar, thoran and a tangy fish curry. Lunch, unlimited refills.

### Pazham pori
Banana fritters with a glass of chai. The 4 pm ritual.

### Puttu & kadala
Steamed rice and coconut cylinders with black chickpea curry.

### Karimeen pollichathu
Pearl spot fish, masala-rubbed and cooked in banana leaf. A backwater speciality.

### Parotta & curry
Flaky layered flatbread, torn into a beef or chicken fry. Late-night staple.

### Payasam
Sweet rice or lentil pudding with jaggery and coconut milk.

### Sulaimani
Black tea with lemon and spice, served after a heavy meal.

**TIP** Eat with your **right hand**. After a banana-leaf meal, folding the leaf toward you means “that was good”.

**TIP** Vegetarian is easy everywhere. For milder food, say “**erivu kurachu**” (less spicy).

**Watch: how to order like a local**
On the channel · youtube.com/@KeralaCoconutShell

07

# Festivals & culture

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Onam** | Aug – Sep | The harvest festival. Flower carpets, sadya feasts, boat races. |
| **Boat races** | Aug – Sep | 100-oar snake boats. The Nehru Trophy at Alappuzha is the big one. |
| **Theyyam** | Dec – Apr, north | Ritual performances in village shrines around Kannur. Often through the night. |
| **Vishu** | April | Malayali new year. Golden konna flowers and fireworks. |
| **Thrissur Pooram** | Apr – May | Caparisoned elephants, drums and enormous crowds. Unforgettable. |

Also look for **Kathakali** (the painted dance-drama, with short nightly shows in Fort Kochi) and **Kalaripayattu**, Kerala's martial art. At temples, cover shoulders and knees and remove shoes. Some temples admit Hindus only, so ask at the gate.

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# Ayurveda & wellness

Ayurveda here is real medicine, not just spa menus. A one-hour massage is lovely; actual treatment means a doctor's consultation and usually **7 to 21 days**.

**Choose well**
Look for centres with Kerala Tourism's Olive Leaf or Green Leaf classification.

**Best season**
The monsoon months are traditionally considered ideal, and often cheaper.

**Be honest**
Share health conditions and medications with the doctor before starting.

09

# Money & budget

The currency is the Indian rupee (₹). Kerala is affordable by international standards, and your money goes furthest in homestays and local restaurants.

| | |
|---|---|
| **UPI** | India pays by scanning QR codes, even at tea stalls. Some prepaid UPI wallets are now open to foreign visitors; check what's available for your passport before you fly. |
| **Cards** | Accepted at hotels, larger restaurants and shops. Tell your bank you're travelling. |
| **Cash** | Still essential for autos, buses, temples and small shops. ATMs are common in towns; carry small notes. |
| **Tipping** | Not expected, always appreciated. Around 5–10% at restaurants; a little extra for your driver and houseboat crew. |

## DAILY BUDGET PER PERSON, APPROX.

Simple
**₹2,500–4,000**
Homestays, buses, local food

Comfortable
**₹6,000–10,000**
Boutique stays, some private car

Splurge
**₹15,000+**
Resorts, car + driver throughout

## WHAT THINGS COST, ROUGHLY

| | |
|---|---|
| Chai & a snack | **₹20–50** |
| Lunch meals at a "hotel" | **₹100–250** |
| Kathakali show | **₹400–600** |
| Short auto ride | **₹30–100** |
| Car + driver, per day | **₹3,000–4,500** |
| Overnight houseboat, per boat | **₹8,000–25,000** |

*Prices are indicative and change with season and demand.*

10

# Pack light, learn a little

## PACKING LIST

- [ ] Loose cotton or linen clothes
- [ ] Something covering shoulders and knees
- [ ] A light layer for Munnar evenings
- [ ] Sandals you can slip off at temples
- [ ] Walking shoes for trails
- [ ] Compact umbrella or rain jacket
- [ ] Mosquito repellent & sunscreen
- [ ] Refillable water bottle
- [ ] Universal plug adaptor
- [ ] Copies of passport & visa
- [ ] Small notes for autos and tips

## MALAYALAM TO TRY

| | |
|---|---|
| **Namaskaram** | Hello |
| **Nanni** | Thank you |
| **Sukhamano?** | How are you? |
| **Athe / Alla** | Yes / No |
| **Sheri** | Okay |
| **Ethra aayi?** | How much is it? |
| **Venda** | No thanks |
| **Vellam** | Water |
| **Erivu kurachu** | Less spicy |
| **... evide aanu?** | Where is ...? |
| **Kollaam!** | Nice! / Great! |

**TIP** A head wobble isn't a no. It usually means "yes", "okay" or "I'm listening". You'll be doing it yourself by day five.

# Nanni for reading.

This guide is free, and it'll stay that way. If it helped you plan, the nicest way to say thank you is to **subscribe on YouTube**. It costs nothing, and it helps me keep making honest, local guides to Kerala.

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What each place is really like, from someone who lives here.

**Seasons & timing**
When to go, what closes, and what's worth the rain.

**Food & everyday life**
How to eat, travel and get by like a local.

*Where are you headed first? Tell me in the comments under any video. I read every one. — Mr. Coconut*



Information checked at time of writing. Confirm visas, closures and prices with official sources before you travel.