

India - Kerala's National Parks & Backwaters

Bargain Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary for February departures

Dates

2020

Sunday 1st November – Monday 9th November 2020

2021

Sunday 14th February – Monday 22nd February 2021
Sunday 7th November – Monday 15th November 2021

2022

Sunday 13th February – Monday 21st February 2022
Sunday 6th November – Monday 14th November 2022

Cost

From £2,295 (London/London); £1,795 (Kochi/Kochi)

Single room supplement

£495

Grading

A. This is a standard wildlife-viewing tour with no strenuous walking

Focus

Birds and mammals



From top: Malabar Trogon, Kerala houseboat & Tiger



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Smooth-coated Otter



Jungle (Grey) Nightjar



Birding the rice paddies



Hundreds of birds



Nilgiri Tahr



Peregrine with prey

Introduction

India boasts a mammal fauna of over 450 species. Many visitors are familiar with the well-known national parks in the north of the country, and of course the magnificent Bengal Tiger. In fact, this supreme predator occurs over a much wider range than might be expected and in the south of the country there are Project Tiger reserves which also offer the opportunity to observe some of the very rare mammals found only in south India and Sri Lanka. The moist, tropical hill forests of the state of Kerala form a distinct vegetation zone in the Western Ghats hills, which has resulted in the evolution of many bird species unique to this region of the country as well as a rich diversity of endemic mammals.



Kerala backwaters

The focus of this tour is the wildlife of southern India. It offers a chance of seeing many of the more widespread Indian species such as Indian Elephant, Sloth Bear, Tiger and Leopard, Gaur and Dhole, as well as a selection of endemic south Indian mammals including Nilgiri Tahr (*Hemitragus hylocrius*), Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*), Nilgiri Langur (*Presbytis johni*), Travancore Flying Squirrel (*Petinomys fuscicapillus*), Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*), Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*) and Nilgiri Marten (*Martes watkinsi*).

Day 1

In Flight

We depart London at 1:40pm on a scheduled Emirates flight via Dubai, arriving in Kochi (formerly Cochin) the following morning.

Day 2

Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary

We will arrive at 8.05am then make the 2-hour drive south to Kumarakom, where we will stay at the beautifully situated Coconut Lagoon or Backwater Ripples or a resort of similar standard, for the night. One of the first resorts on the backwaters, Coconut Lagoon is an aesthetically done resort recreating a village atmosphere. The resort has an excellent Ayurveda centre where you can try a relaxing massage (might have to pre book) or their butterfly garden to look up the various species found in the area.

After lunch we will visit Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary where numerous species of wildfowl and waterbirds can be found, especially in the late afternoon as large numbers of herons and egrets fly in to roost in the Sanctuary. Access to the Sanctuary is easy, involving just a 5-minute boat ride, followed by a short stroll.



Day 3

Drive to Alleppey; overnight on houseboat

After breakfast enjoy another trip to the Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary.

In the afternoon, board the private riceboat for an overnight stay on the backwaters. Aptly named the 'Venice of the East', Alleppey is criss-crossed by a network of canals. It is a pleasant, easygoing market town surrounded by coconut plantations and built on the canals which serve the coir industry of the backwaters. We will enjoy an overnight houseboat cruise, which allows us to drift along the backwaters here, travelling along narrow canals, passing paddy fields and water-bound villages.



Some 50 years ago, there were more than 5,000 houseboats (known locally as 'kettuvalloms') in the backwaters of Kerala that were mainly used for transporting goods, but they became obsolete when these began to be moved by rail and road. Today the houseboats have become popular with foreign tourists and some 150 are used for this purpose, offering guests a very comfortable and unusual means of navigating the network of waterways. A standard houseboat is about 17 metres long and about five metres wide, holding up to 30 tonnes.

The kettuvalloms are constructed with eco-friendly materials such as bamboo mat, areca-nut trees and coir. They are designed for comfortable cruising and overnight stays. Each houseboat has one or two bedrooms and a bathroom with a toilet and washbasin, a living-cum-dining room, sundeck and a kitchen. The boat has solar lamps and fans as well as hurricane lamps. Thatched awnings on both sides of the boat allow the breeze and views to 'flow' in. There is also a separate rest room for the crew. Some boats are powered by an outboard engine/motor.

Usually, every houseboat has a team of three staff, including a cook and two crew members. The cook also acts as the captain of the boat. Meals include lunch and evening coffee/tea with snacks, as well as dinner and breakfast, depending on the time of boarding and disembarking the boat.

Day 4 – 5

Drive to Periyar Tiger Reserve

Disembark after breakfast at Alleppey and drive to Periyar Tiger Reserve. Descending from a high range of hills, we drop into the lowlands before rising once again into the Cardamom Hills, to reach Periyar. This is one of the 16 Project Tiger reserves in India, and considered by many to be one of the most picturesque and beautiful wildlife sanctuaries in the world. With its waterways, forests and grasslands, it provides a superb start to our wildlife tour of southern India.

Despite the destruction of much of the lowland forest within the reserve, as a result of the construction of a dam across the Periyar River in 1895, its 777 square kilometres provide a haven for a wide range of mammals, including Tiger, Elephant, Gaur, Sloth Bear, Leopard, Dhole, Nilgiri Langur and Lion-tailed Macaque.

It is estimated that some 800 Indian Elephants inhabit Periyar and during our stay we will enjoy boat rides (boat excursions can be withdrawn at anytime without prior notice), which should give us close views of Elephant herds browsing the succulent vegetation at the water's edge or bathing in the shallows. This is one of the best places in India to observe Elephant behaviour and with the aid of our shared boat we can also approach other wildlife on the shores of the lake.



Asian Elephants

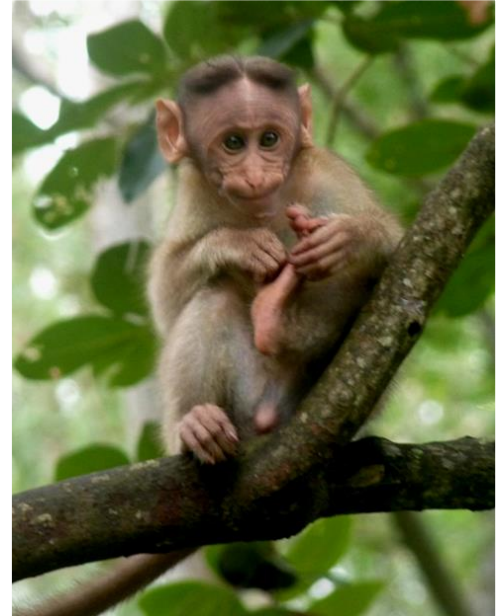


Brahminy Kite

Wild Boar are one of the more common mammal species found here, and groups of up to 40 or 50 are not unusual in the Reserve. Muntjac and the tiny Mouse Deer are both shy creatures that may be glimpsed at the forest edge before running to cover – they need to remain constantly vigilant to escape the attention of a pack of Dhole (Wild Dogs), one of the most formidable predators in the country. Numbers of Dhole have fluctuated greatly, as disease and persecution have decimated populations, but we will hope to be lucky enough to see a hunting party making its way along the shores of the reservoir. Good fortune is also necessary to see one of Periyar's 40 Tigers, but the big cat's fondness for water and the presence of prey animals around the shore may tempt one of these magnificent beasts to emerge from the forest and provide us with a wonderful tour highlight.

Less spectacular, but of great interest to naturalists, are some of the smaller mammals in the reserve, including the four species of primate, two of which are endemic to the Western Ghats. The rare Lion-tailed Macaque and Nilgiri Langur both occur here, as do Bonnet Macaque and Common Langur. Not all movements in the canopy will be monkeys, however. Indian Giant Squirrels also inhabit the forests and at dusk we could spot (nocturnal) Flying Squirrels. Several of Periyar's reptiles, and one of its species of amphibians, also have aspirations to flight – the well-known flying lizard and flying-snake and the less familiar flying-frog adopt a gliding strategy to seek new feeding areas or to escape predators.

Herds of shy Gaur, the largest bovine in the country, browse the secluded marshy areas inside Periyar and melt away into cover when alarmed. These huge bison are vulnerable to the ravages of rinderpest disease which spreads to them from domestic cattle, and a programme is now in place to immunise the cattle in the surrounding district to provide a buffer zone for the Gaur. Other mammals to look out for during our stay include Golden Jackal, Sloth Bear, Ruddy Mongoose, Stripe-necked Mongoose, Leopard, Eurasian Otter, Smooth-coated Otter, Jungle Cat, Fishing Cat and Rusty-spotted Cat.



Bonnet Macaque

The Reserve also has a rich and varied bird fauna and we'll be hoping to see several of the species found only in southern India and Sri Lanka, such as Grey Jungle fowl, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Malabar Parakeet, White-cheeked Barbet, Crimson-fronted Barbet, Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike, Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Rufous Babbler, White-bellied Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, Ruby-throated Bulbul and White-bellied Treepie.

For our time at Periyar we will be staying at the Hotel Aranya Niwas in Thekkady. This attractive, colonial-style hotel is set inside the Reserve near the banks of Periyar Lake. It is a comfortable 3-star hotel and rooms have en suite facilities.



Hotel Aranya Niwas



Day 6 – 7

Thattekkad; Bird Sanctuary

After a final visit to the National Park and breakfast at Periyar, we will drive to Thattekkad. The drive is around 6-7 hours. We will have a few birding stops and also a stop for our lunch, on the way.



Sri Lanka Frogmouths

The Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary, is one of the important bird sanctuaries of India. Salim Ali, one of the well known ornithologist has described this sanctuary as “the richest bird habitat on peninsular India”. The literal meaning of Thattekkad is flat forest, the region is an evergreen low-land forest and is located between the branches of Periyar River, the longest river in Kerala. Much of the forest has now been converted to agricultural and plantation areas, but the surviving areas certainly give glimpses of the rich bird diversity of the once widespread lowland forests of Kerala. A trip

through this sanctuary would certainly be a bonanza for any birder with over 270 species in a relatively small area of 25 sqkms area. Chances are high in spotting the rare Mottled Wood Owl, Spot-bellied Eagle Owl, Malayan Night Heron, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Grey-headed Bulbul and the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon in the area. Our naturalist will take you to the spots either inside or outside through the peripheries of the sanctuary depending on the best spots for sighting during our visit.

Our stay will be in comfortable tented cottages at the Hornbill Camp. Located on the banks of the river the property has well-appointed Cottage Tents with en-suite facilities. The camp overlooks the Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary which is on the opposite bank of the river. This camp is an ideal place to sight maximum number of birds in such a small geographic area.

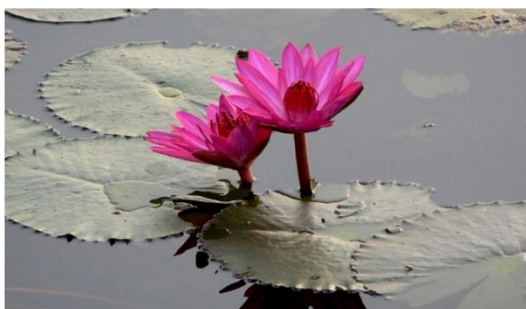


Hornbill camp tented cottages

Day 8

Kochi

We'll travel to Kochi by road, a journey of about three hours and then have time to for some sightseeing in this former princely capital.



Lotus

Kochi lies at the heart of the ancient state of Kerala, and its position, straddling a number of islands and peninsulas, together with its rich trading past and Jewish, Portuguese, British and Dutch influences, make it one of the most fascinating cities of India. The commercial city of Kochi, also known as ‘The Queen of the Arabian Sea’, is famous for its exquisite designer gold jewellery.

Tour members wishing to sample local culture will not want to miss a Kathakali dance performance in the evening. The most popular and sacred dance-drama of Kerala, Kathakali, dates back at least 400 years and requires lengthy and rigorous training to attain complete control of the body and emotions so as to be able to render all its nuances through facial expressions and hand gestures. Themes centre on the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. We suggest arriving early in order to witness the artists putting on their make-up.



We'll be staying at the Killians or similar for the night. The Killians is a property located in the old quarters and is a couple of minutes walk from the Chinese nets and other sights in Fort Cochin. The rooms are comfortable and it has a pool and a good restaurant. This is a good base to explore Fort Cochin due to its central location.

Day 9

London

In the morning we will depart Kochi on a scheduled Emirates flight, departing mid-morning. We are due to arrive back in London at 6.20pm.

NB. Please note that the itinerary offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Grading

A (easy). This is a standard wildlife viewing tour with no strenuous walking involved but whenever possible we will be birding and mammal-watching on foot. There are some, optional, more difficult walks at Periyar.

Weather

The weather should be pleasantly warm, even hot, but somewhat cooler at night in the hills. Light cottons are advisable, but as temperatures at Munnar go down to 5-10°C in winter, light woollens are recommended. A lightweight waterproof garment or umbrella is useful.

Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International flights in economy class.
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner) except for the main meals at Kumarakom and Kochi. Comfortable accommodation with private facilities.
- All transport and guiding.
- All wildlife excursions, park fees and reserve entry fees.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Online visa (currently US\$40 plus the bank transaction charges of 2.5%).
- Drinks (though most lodges in the national parks provide boiled drinking water or a bottle of water with their compliments).
- Discretionary tipping (leaders and drivers). During the course of your holiday you will receive periodic assistance from a wide variety of enthusiastic, friendly and helpful local guides, jeep drivers, trackers, hotel porters, waiters and other local people. The tipping of these individuals will be handled by your tour leader(s) and its cost is included within the price of your holiday.
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry, camera fees.

Flights

We use scheduled Emirates flights for this tour. This airline offers an excellent all-round service, including departures from Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. Please note that departures from regional airports are subject to an additional charge of £125. If you would prefer to travel in Business Class, it's normally available at a supplement charge of around £2,595.

If you would prefer to travel from one of these regional airports or fly in business class, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.

The flights are not direct and have a stopover in Dubai.

Extensions

The tour may be extended by visits to other wildlife areas in India such as Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary (also known as Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary) or Gavi Tiger Reserve. We will be glad to discuss options with you and provide quotations as required. The airfare is not affected by staying longer in India, so the only additional costs will be for ground arrangements.

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How to book your place

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Please note that as all our Bargain Selection tours are carefully costed on maximum group sizes to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of up to 10% on groups falling short of 5.

Please provide us with your passport details (passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth) at the time of booking. It is important to note that game safaris will be booked using the same passport details that you provide us at the time of booking, and it will not be possible to change these details once they have been booked. (If you renew your passport after booking, please also bring the old passport whose details you gave us at the time of booking as this will also be required).

Summary from our November tour:

The tour covered the major destinations in Kerala, focusing on the flora and fauna of this region. The backwater village of Kumarakom and the stay on board a houseboat provided an excellent chance to observe and enjoy various wetland and water birds: cormorants, egrets, herons, kingfishers, kites and terns were common. In Periyar, we had the chance to explore the reserve through different walks, night treks and boating on the lake. Spotting Great Hornbill and Black Baza were certainly highlights, along with seeing mammals like Malabar Giant Squirrel, Sambar Deer, Indian Gaur and Asian Elephant. Munnar, the tea growing area in the high ranges, is also home to interesting species of birds endemic to the Western Ghats. The tour ended in Cochin where we explored the historic port town with a guide, and enjoyed a traditional dance show.