

CRUISING THE KERALA BACKWATERS

5 – 20 MARCH 2025

FROM
£5,995
PER PERSON

The logo for The Ultimate Travel Company features a stylized white wave icon above the company name. The text "The Ultimate" is in a larger, bold, serif font, and "TRAVEL COMPANY" is in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font below it.

The Ultimate
TRAVEL COMPANY

AN ENCHANTING JOURNEY ALONG EMERALD WATERS

Join an enchanting tour in Southern India beginning in Chennai (Madras), the sprawling capital of Tamil Nadu and birthplace of the East India Company in 1639. Travel on via the dramatic 'Shore Temples' of Mahabilipuram, overlooking the Bay of Bengal, to the former French city of Pondicherry and explore the charming colonial quarter and famous Ashram of Auroville.

Then commence a pioneering cruise through Kerala, from the modern port city Cochin (Kochi) to the ancient port town of Alleppey (Alappuzha) passing through Kottayam, land of rubber and spices. Travel aboard a traditional nine-cabin wooden rice barge on what promises be an enlightening as well as an extremely relaxing holiday.

Kerala has an extensive network of waterways that lace its interior coastline, stretching along almost its entire length of around 600 kms. It is a land of copious rainfall which flows from the hills and mountain passes in freshwater canals and streams to join the 40 odd rivers in the state. This labyrinthine network of canals, streams and rivers, which converge to form lagoons, make up the Backwaters and give rise to a unique eco system which is a haven for nature. The area has been named by National Geographic as the 'Green Venice of the East' due to the green coconut trees which turn the backwaters a vibrant emerald green, with the setting sun adding splashes of red, all contributing to the serenity of this tropical destination. The waterways teem with life as wooden boats are the only way of travelling between villages. Along the way visit temples, churches, marketplaces, paddy fields, beaches and boat yards. Learn about and experience the vibrant culture of the region including coir handloom weaving, snake boat regattas, traditional toddy tapping, local dances, martial arts and festivals.

The tour will be accompanied throughout by popular and experienced local guide Shagzil Khan.





Chinese Fishing Nets, Cochin



St. Francis, Mattancherry



Kalaripayattu

16 - DAY ITINERARY, DEPARTING 5 MARCH 2025

5 March London / Chennai

Suggested flights (not included in the tour cost) British Airways BA 35 departing London Heathrow at 14.05 hrs.

6 March Chennai

Arrive in Chennai at 05.31 hrs. Group transfer to Taj Connemara Hotel, dating from 1854 and carefully restored with modern amenities, where two nights are spent.

Lunch at the hotel. Option to visit to the Chennai Government Museum with its outstanding collection of bronze statues. Dinner at the hotel.

7 March Chennai

Morning city tour of Chennai (formerly Madras) capital of Tamil Nadu where the East India Company was established in 1639, leaving a legacy of elegant buildings and gardens. Visit Kapaleeshwar Temple at Mylapore, the Cathedral of San Thome and The Fort, which originally dates from the 1640s

Lunch at a local restaurant. Afternoon at leisure. Dinner at the hotel.

8 March Chennai / Mahabalipuram / Pondicherry

Morning departure to Mahabalipuram, famous for its fabulous rock-cut temples, friezes and shore temples built by the Pallava dynasty in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Drive south to Pondicherry, former capital of French India and still retaining a strong French colonial influence

with pastel coloured villas and shady courtyards. Check into the beautifully restored colonial mansion, the Palais de Mahe Hotel, situated in the heart of the historic French Quarter, where two nights are spent. Remainder of the afternoon at leisure to enjoy the hotel's facilities including a swimming pool and Ayurvedic spa. Dinner at the hotel.

9 March Pondicherry

Full day tour of Pondicherry starting with a visit to the town of Auroville (City of Dawn), founded in 1968 as a tribute to revolutionary and philosopher Sri Aurobindo, where different nationalities can live in peace and harmony.

Lunch at Villa Shanti restaurant. Walking tour of the old French Quarter with its elegant leafy avenues and chic boutiques and cafes, including the 300-year-old Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception. Rickshaw ride from the French Quarter to the Tamil Quarter with its colourful Grand Bazaar and Hindu temples. Dinner at the hotel.

10 March Pondicherry / Chennai / Cochin

Transfer to Chennai airport.

Lunch at a local restaurant en route. Take a domestic flight to Cochin. On arrival transfer to Brunton Boatyard Hotel, built in Portuguese and Dutch style, where two nights are spent. Located on the historic stretch of Cochin's famed harbour, the hotel has a swimming pool looking right out to sea and a spa. Dinner at the hotel.

11 March Cochin

Full day tour of the historic Portuguese settlement of Fort Cochin including St. Francis Church, India's first European church and original burial site of Vasco de Gama; the old Jewish Synagogue, built in 1568 and magnificently decorated by Chinese tiles and Belgian chandeliers; and the Chinese fishing nets, unique to Cochin.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Walking tour of Mattancherry, the bustling part of Old Fort Cochin and the epicentre of the spice trade for centuries, to discover its rich blend of Arab, Portuguese, British, and Dutch influences. Visit the Dutch Palace originally built by the Portuguese and modified by the Dutch in 17th century. Dinner at the hotel.

12 March Cochin / Maradu / Vaikom

Check out and drive to the nearby village of Nettoor and see a performance of the local martial art Kalaripayattu. Drive to Pallippuram, at the northern border of Cochin, to embark on the river cruise boat RV Vaikundam.

Traditional lunch on board. Set sail to on the Backwaters. Talk on Cochin's geographical, cultural and social significance. Stop at the ancient village of Vaikom in Kottayam, land of natural rubber latex and spices, and see a performance of the traditional dance Kathakali. Tuk tuk ride to the ancient Temple of Shiva where each element of the temple represents an element of the human body. Dinner on board.



St Mary's Basilica, Champakkulam



Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary

13 March Chenganda / Kumarakom

Cruise to Chenganda Village and see the locals making coir, collecting mussels and prawns, fishing and coconut farming. Return to the boat and cruise through the Thanneermukkom Barrage which divides the salt-water half of the lake from the fresh-water half.

Lunch at a farmhouse located on an island reclaimed from the Backwaters. Take a walk on the farm and enjoy a demonstration of traditional Syrian Christian cuisine. Dinner on board.

14 March Kumarakom / Lake Vembanad / Kavalam

Early morning bird watching by local boat in the Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary, made up of a cluster of lagoons of Lake Vembanad with a backdrop of mangroves, paddy fields and coconut groves. See endemic waterfowl, cuckoos, owls, egrets, herons and duck and also migratory parrots, teal, lark and flycatchers. Return to the boat for breakfast. Cruise the lake, passing reclaimed paddy cultivating regions.

Lunch on board. Arrive in Kavalam where the River Pampa reverses its course and drains into Lake Vembanad. Explore by local ferry, walk along the dykes surrounding the expanses of paddy fields and interact with the farmers and a women's collective. Cruise on until sunset, en route meeting toddy tappers to learn how they make this local alcoholic beverage from the sap of coconut palm flowers. Dinner on board.

15 March Kainakari / Chavara Bhavan / Mankompu

Cruise to Kainakari, another vibrant village in the interior, and take a local

boat through the narrow canals. Stop at Chavara Bhavan, the ancestral home of Saint Kuriakose Chavara, the first canonised Catholic male saint of Indian origin, now a museum.

Lunch on board. Continue cruising and arrive in Mankompu village and see a cultural performance. Dinner on board.

16 March Aranmula / Champakkulam / Changankari

Drive to Aranmula Village and visit the workshop of a family of mirror makers whose secret methods have been passed down through generations. See the nearby ancient temple of Krishna 'Aranmula Sree Parthasarthy'.

Lunch at a fine local house on the banks of the holy river Pampa and visit the institute of Traditional Architecture and Mural Painting. Return to the boat and cruise to Champakkulam Village. Visit the monumental St. Mary's Church on the riverside, built in 1550 by the descendants of Syrian Christian traders, who converted to Roman Catholicism under the Portuguese. Cruise on to the remote village of Changankari. Dinner on board.

17 March Changankari / Thottappalli

Early morning walk in Changankari Village. Continue sailing towards the coastal village of Thottappalli, passing by the spillway in Kuttanad, which prevents the saline water at the river mouth from flooding the low-lying paddy fields. Learn about indigenous practices of paddy cultivation on reclaimed land below sea level

Lunch on board. Stop to plant a coconut sapling to mark the cruise. The coconut tree is considered the 'Kalpavriksha' or the Divine Tree of Kerala because all parts of coconut

tree are used in one way or the other. Drop anchor at Thottappalli and take a walk along the beach to see local coastal life. Dinner on board.

18 March Mannar / Karumadi / Kanjippadom

Visit a temple with female priests where serpents are worshipped. Continue by road to Mannar Village, famous for ornate locks, lamps and vessels used in temples.

Lunch on board. Visit the quiet and rustic village of Karumadi and see its 11th-century statue of Buddha preserved in a small shrine. Cruise to Kanjippadom Village to visit a boat yard and see the art of traditional Kettuvallum or coir rope lashed wooden plank boat building. Farewell dinner on board.

19 March Mannar / Karumadi / Kanjippadom

Cruise to Punnamada Lake, where the annual Snake Boat Race is held in traditional highly decorated boats. Cruise to Alleppey, the ancient port town, criss-crossed by rivers, lakes, canals, lagoons and paddy fields, known as the Venice of the East. Disembark and take walk through the marketplace. Transfer to Cochin airport.

Lunch at a local restaurant en route. Domestic flight to Chennai and transfer to the Trident Chennai airport hotel where one night is spent. Dinner under own arrangements.

20 March Chennai / London

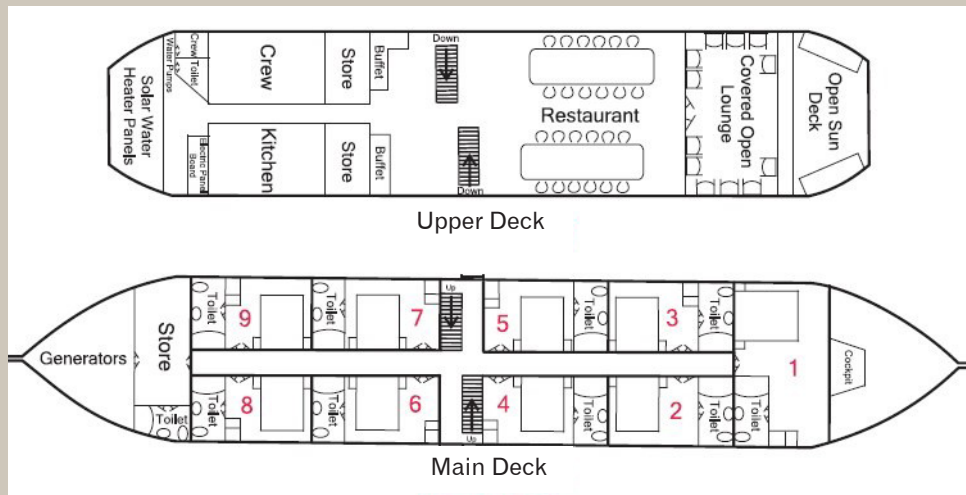
Group transfer to Chennai Airport for suggested flights (not included) British Airway BA 36 departing at 07.50 hrs arriving London Heathrow at 13.10 hrs.

RV VAIKUNDAM (ABODE OF GODS)



The river boats of today are modified versions of the traditional Kettuvallom or rice barges, which in past years were used for transporting produce from farms in the interior of Kerala to the markets. Today they are comfortable cruising homes allowing guests to unwind, relax and immerse themselves in the pristine nature and captivating local activity along the meandering network of the Backwaters.

RV Vaikundam has nine well-appointed cabins, with en suite bathrooms, on its lower deck and a well-appointed kitchen, an air-conditioned and exquisitely furnished dining room and an open-air lounge on its upper deck. 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 in keeping with traditional methods. The wood is coated with caustic black resin made by boiling cashew kernel and fish oil and is periodically treated with neem oil and fish oil. The rooms are made using wooden panels, bamboo poles and bamboo mats, following the traditional practices.



TOUR PRICES PER PERSON

Tour Price	£5,995
Single Supplement	£1,790

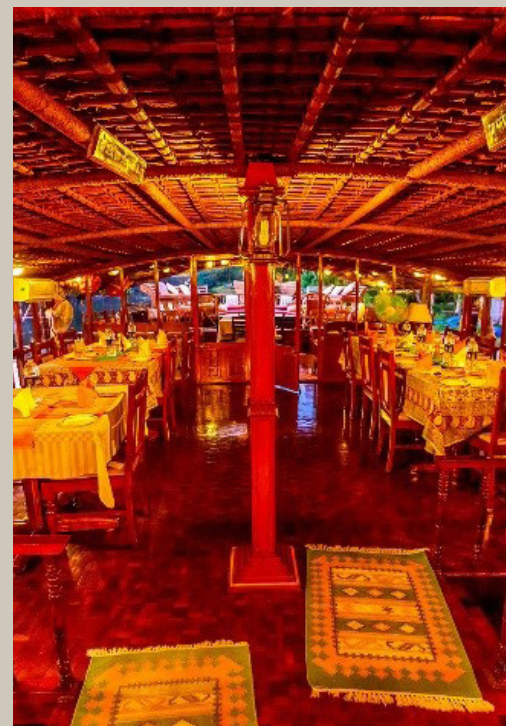
Please note we have not included the cost of the flights in the tour price. Please contact us for prices should you wish to book them through us.

PRICE INCLUDES

- Accommodation throughout as shown in the itinerary
- Breakfast daily; 14 lunches; 13 dinners
- All entrance fees, visits and excursions
- Group airport transfers and transportation as per the itinerary
- Domestic flight Chennai / Cochin and Cochin / Chennai
- Portage
- Gratuities in restaurants for included meals
- Gratuities to driver/s
- Gratuities to guide/s
- The services of a local national guide throughout

PRICE EXCLUDES

- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Visas
- Items of personal expenditure (e.g. Telephone calls / laundry etc.)
- Government levies or taxes introduced after costing and publication of this programme on 02/04/2024





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