

Kerala



Kerala is where India slips down into second gear, stops to smell the roses and always talks to strangers. A strip of land between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, its perfect climate flirts unabashedly with the fertile soil, and everything glows. An easy-going and successful socialist state, Kerala has a liberal hospitality that stands out as its most laudable achievement.

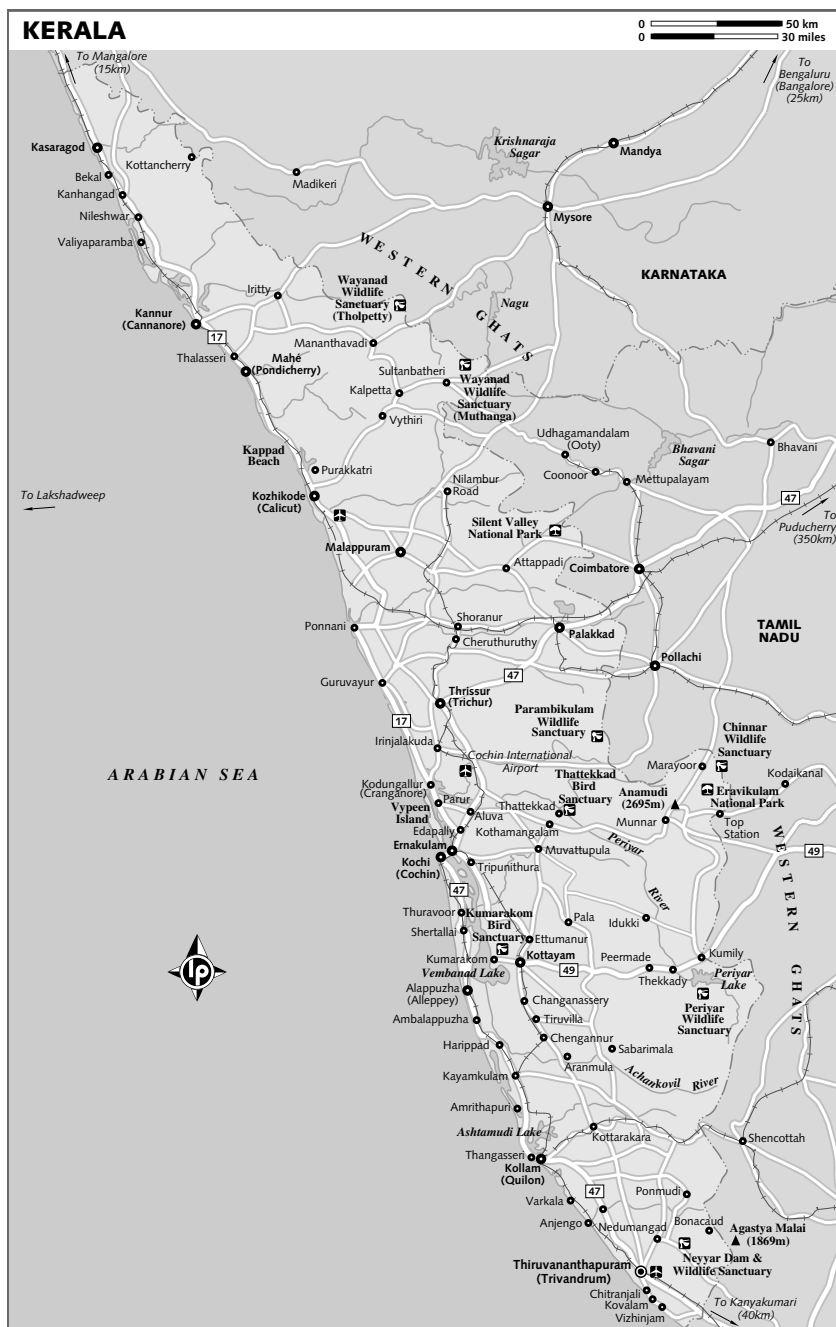
The backwaters that meander through Kerala are the emerald jewel in South India's crown. Here, spindly networks of rivers, canals and lagoons nourish a seemingly infinite number of rice paddies and coconut groves, while sleek houseboats cruise the water highways from one bucolic village to another. Along the coast, slices of perfect, sandy beach beckon the sun-worshipping crowd, and far inland the mountainous Ghats are covered in vast plantations of spices and tea. Exotic wildlife also thrives in the hills, for those who need more than just the smell of cardamom growing to get their juices flowing.

This flourishing land isn't good at keeping its secret: adventurers and traders have been in on it for years. The serene Fort Cochin pays homage to its colonial past, each building whispering a tale of Chinese visitors, Portuguese traders, Jewish settlers, Syrian Christians and Muslim merchants. Yet even with its colonial distractions, Kerala manages to cling to its vibrant traditions: Kathakali – a blend of religious play and dance; *kalaripayat* – a gravity-defying martial art; and *theyyam* – a trance-induced ritual. Mixed with some of the most tastebud-tingling cuisine in India and you can imagine how hard it will be to leave before you even get here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cruise the hydro-highways of Kerala's **backwaters** (p982) on a houseboat; an entry in our top 10 things-to-do-before-you-die list
- Kick back on shimmering beaches by day and feast on cliff-side seafood by night at **Varkala** (p973)
- Soak in the culture and serenity of captivating **Fort Cochin** (p1005), a trading-post city echoing hundreds of years of colonial history
- Go elephant spotting at **Wayanad** (p1019) or **Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary** (p988), then grab your logbook for some bird-watching at **Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary** (p987) or **Thattekad Bird Sanctuary** (p1002)
- See an ancient ritual of spirit possession called *theyyam* around **Kannur** (Cannanore, p1021)
- Take in a kaleidoscope of green at tea plantations around **Munnar** (p999)
- Get oiled, rubbed and treated with the aromatic herbs used in **Ayurvedic massage** (p975)





FAST FACTS

- Population: 31.8 million
- Area: 38,864 sq km
- Capital: Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum)
- Main language: Malayalam
- When to go: October to March

History

Traders have been drawn to the whiff of Kerala's spices and to the shine of its ivory for more than 3000 years. The coast was known to the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Chinese, and was a transit point for spices from the Moluccas (eastern Indonesia). It was probably via Kerala that Chinese products and ideas first found their way to the West.

The kingdom of Cheras ruled much of Kerala until the early Middle Ages, competing with kingdoms and small fiefdoms for territory and trade. Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498 opened the floodgates to European colonialism as Portuguese, Dutch and English interests fought Arab traders, and then each other, for control of the lucrative spice trade.

The present-day state of Kerala was created in 1956 from the former states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. A tradition of valuing the arts and education resulted in a post-Independence state that is one of the most progressive in India.

Kerala had the first freely elected communist government in the world, coming to power in 1957 and holding power regularly since. The participatory political system has resulted in a more equitable distribution of land and income, and impressive health and education statistics (see p965). Many Malayalis (speakers of Malayalam, the state's official language) work in the Middle East, and remittances play a significant part in the economy.

National Parks

All national parks mentioned in this chapter close for one week for a tiger census during the months of January or February. The dates differ, so check with Kerala Tourism for exact dates.

Information

Kerala Tourism (☎ 0471-2321132; www.keralatourism.org) is a government tourism promotion body with information offices – usually called District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) or Tourist Facilitation Centres – in most major towns. Be aware of places with official-sounding names that are actually private tour companies.

ACCOMMODATION

Parts of Kerala – particularly the beachside towns and backwater hubs – have a distinct high season around November to March. Around the mid-December to mid-January peak season, prices creep up again, though great deals are to be had during the monsoon season (April to September).

Getting Around

The Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) runs an extensive network of buses between most Kerala cities. They're not the fastest or most comfortable things on earth, but are reliable and nearly always punctual. Private buses ply the same routes, plus some the KSRTC don't cover, and can be more comfortable – though departure times are more erratic.

SOUTHERN KERALA

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM (TRIVANDRUM)

☎ 0471 / pop 889,191

The unpretentious capital of Kerala, Trivandrum (many people still call it by this colonial name, understandably) rests upon seven low hills. You only have to walk a few metres off the fume-filled racetrack that passes for a main road to appreciate its gentler side, where much of old Kerala's ambience remains intact. Pagoda-shaped buildings with red-tiled roofs line the narrow, winding lanes, and life slows exponentially the further you walk. For most visitors it's just a gateway to the golden-sand resorts of nearby Kovalam and Varkala, but there are some great attractions in and around town for visitors with time to wander off the traveller trail.

Orientation

Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd, the traffic-clogged artery of town, runs 4km north–south from

FESTIVALS IN KERALA

Across the state on any night (but especially during festival season from November to mid-May) there are literally hundreds of vivid temple festivals being held, featuring an array of performing arts and rituals, music and the odd elephant procession. Some highlights:

Ernakulathappan Utsavam (Jan/Feb; Shiva Temple, Ernakulam, Kochi (Cochin), p1007) Hugely significant for residents of Kochi, the climax of this eight-day festival brings a procession of 15 splendidly decorated elephants, ecstatic music and fireworks.

Bharni Utsavam (Feb/Mar; Chettikulangara Bhaghavathy Temple, Chettikulangara village, near Kayamkulam, p980) This one-day festival is dedicated to the popular Kerala goddess Bhaghavathy. It's famous for its *kootiattam* (traditional Sanskrit drama) ritual and the spectacular procession to the temple of larger-than-life effigies.

Thirunakkara Utsavam (Mar; Thirunakkara Shiva Temple, Kottayam, p985) There's all-night Kathakali dancing on the third and fourth nights of this 10-day festival; on the last two nights there are processions of caparisoned elephants.

Pooram Festival (Apr; Asraman Shree Krishna Swami Temple, Kollam (Quilon), p978) There are full-night Kathakali performances during this 10-day festival; on the last day there's a procession of 40 ornamented elephants in Asraman Maidan.

Thrissur Pooram (Apr/May; Vadakkumnatha Temple, Thrissur (Trichur), p1016) The elephant procession to end all elephant processions. Thrissur is Kerala's festival hot spot; see the Thrissur section for more details.

Nehru Trophy Snake Boat Race (2nd Sat in Aug; Punnamadakalyal, Alappuzha (Alleppey), p984) The most popular of Kerala's boat races.

Aranmula Boat Race (Aug/Sep; near Shree Parthasarathy Temple, Aranmula, p988) This water regatta recreates a ritualistic journey in honour of Krishna. It's a spectacularly exciting event, with crowds cheering as rowers shout along with the songs of the boatmen.

Onam (Aug/Sep; statewide) Kerala's biggest cultural celebration is the 10-day Onam, when the entire state celebrates the golden age of mythical King Mahabali. This is primarily a family affair, with an emphasis on feasting and decorating the home in anticipation of the king's visit.

Ashthamudi Craft & Art Festival (Dec/Jan; Asraman Maidan, Kollam (Quilon), p978) This festival, held every second year, features folk art from all over India, with workshops, demonstrations and exhibitions.

the museums and zoo to the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple area.

Information

BOOKSHOPS & LIBRARIES

Alliance Française (☎ 2320666; aftinfo@afindia.org; Forest Office Lane, Vazhuthacaud; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Library and cultural events.

British Library (☎ 2330716; www.britishcouncilonline.org; YMCA Rd; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Sat) Open only to members (Rs 900 per year), but visitors can usually browse.

DC Books (☎ 2453379; www.dcbooks.com; Statue Rd; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Kerala's excellent bookshop chain, with a respectable selection of fiction in English and nonfiction books on India.

Modern Book Centre (☎ 2331826; Gandhari Amman Kovil Rd; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-8.30pm Mon-Sat)

INTERNET ACCESS

Almikkice (MG Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 7.30am-11.30pm) the best and friendliest of several internet places in this small mall.

Yahoo Internet City (Manjalikulam Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-9.30pm) Fast connections in cartoon-coloured cubicles.

MEDICAL SERVICES

General hospital (☎ 2307874; Statue Rd) About 1km west of MG Rd.

MONEY

There are ATMs that accept foreign cards all along MG Rd. Travellers cheques can be processed at the Canara Bank.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Paramount Digital Colour Lab (☎ 2331643; MG Rd; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) Prints and produces CDs from digital; sells memory cards and digital accessories.

POST & TELEPHONE

There are several STD/ISD kiosks around town.

Main post office (☎ 2473071; MG Rd)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Facilitation Centre (☎ 2321132; Museum Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm) Supplies maps and brochures.

Tourist Reception Centre (☎ 2330031; Central Station Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Arranges KTDC tours (see p966) and car rental.

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM (TRIVANDRUM)

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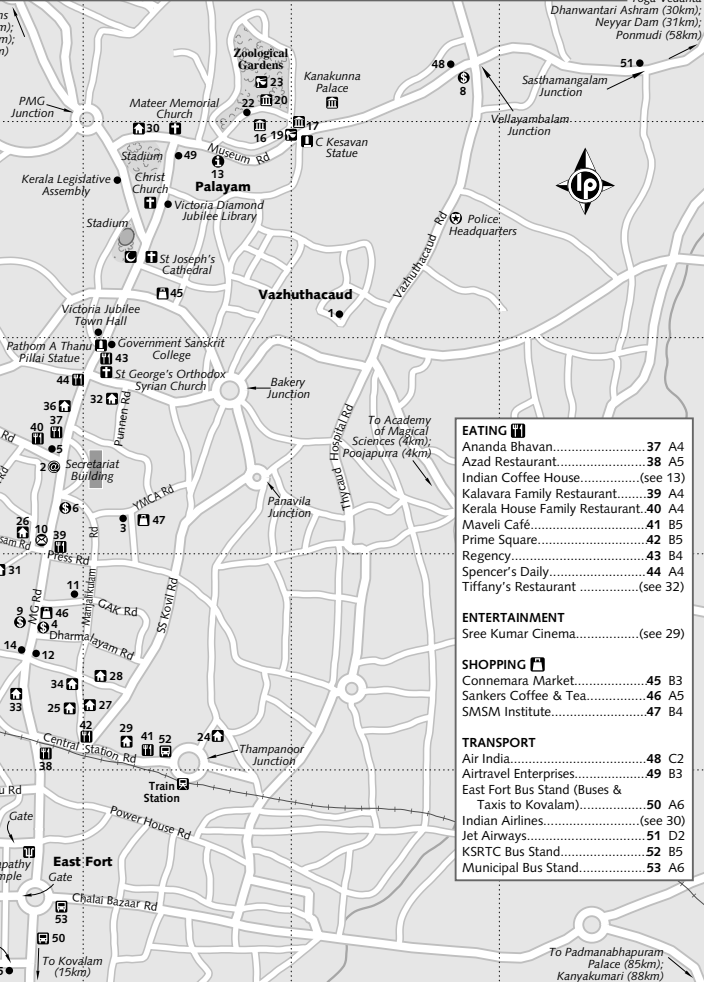
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To Wild Palms On Sea (20km); Varkala (51km); Kochi (222km)



To Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Dhanwantari Ashram (30km); Neyyar Dam (31km); Ponmudi (58km)

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Sights & Activities

ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS & MUSEUMS

This well-cultivated collection of museums, a gallery and an excellent zoo are a peaceful haven from the flurry of the city.

The modern **zoological gardens** (admission Rs 6, camera Rs 20; ☎ 9am-5.15pm Tue-Sun) are among the most impressive in the subcontinent. There are shaded paths meandering through miles of woodland and lakes, where animals happily cavort in massive, open enclosures that mimic their natural habitats. There's also a separate **reptile house** (entrance with zoo ticket), where dozens of the slithery things do their thing and cobras frequently flare their hoods – just don't ask what the cute guinea pigs are for.

A single Rs 6 entry ticket, purchased at the **ticket counter** (☎ 10am-4pm), covers the following **gallery and museums** (☎ 10am-5pm Tue & Thu-Sun, 1-5pm Wed) in the park. Housed in an absorbing Keralan-style wooden building from 1880, the **Napier Museum** has an eclectic display of bronzes, Buddhist sculptures, temple carts and ivory carvings. The painted carnivalesque interior is stunning and worth a look in its own right. The dusty **Natural History Museum** has hundreds of stuffed animals and birds, a fine skeleton collection and the odd empty display case. The **Sri Chitra Art Gallery** has paintings of the Rajput, Mughal and Tanjore schools, and works by Ravi Varma.

SRI PADMANABHASWAMY TEMPLE

This 260-year-old **temple** (☎ 4am-7.30pm) is Thiruvananthapuram's spiritual heart and the

city's erstwhile guardian. Spilling over 2400 sq metres, its main entrance is the 30m tall, seven-tier eastern *gopuram* (gateway tower). In the inner sanctum, the deity Padmanabha reclines on the sacred serpent and is made from over 10,000 *salagramam* (sacred stones) that were purportedly, and no doubt slowly, transported from Nepal by elephant.

The temple is officially open to Hindus only, but the path around to the right of the gate offers good views of the *gopuram*.

PUTHE MALIGA PALACE MUSEUM

The **Puthe Maliga Palace Museum** (admission Rs 20; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is housed in the 200-year-old palace of the Travancore maharajas. Based on typical Keralan architecture, it has carved wooden ceilings, marble sculptures and even imported Belgian glass – it took 5000 workers four years to complete. Inside you'll find Kathakali images, an armoury, portraits of Maharajas, ornate thrones and other artefacts.

The annual **classical music festival** is held here in January/February.

VELI TOURIST PARK

At the junction of Veli Lake and the Arabian sea, 8km west of the city, this unique **park** (☎ 2500785; admission Rs 5; ☎ 8am-7.30pm) showcases strikingly oversized sculptures by local artist Kanai Kunhiraman. It's well designed, and the ponds, mammoth concrete conches and quasi-erotic curves of the artwork make for an interesting backdrop for a picnic or a stroll.

LEADER OF THE PACK

In 1957, Kerala was first in the world to freely elect a communist government. While communism's hammer and sickle hasn't had much luck in running other parts of the world, Kerala's unique blend of democratic-socialist principles has a pretty impressive track record.

Kerala has been labelled 'the most socially advanced state in India' by Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. Land reform and a focus on infrastructure, health and education have played a large part in Kerala's success. The literacy rate (91%) is the highest of any developing nation in the world, though a strong history of education goes back centuries to the days of magnanimous Rajas and active missionaries. The infant mortality rate in Kerala is one-fifth of the national average, while life expectancy stands at 73 years, 10 years higher than the rest of the country.

The picture is not all rosy, however. A lack of any industrial development or foreign investment means that many educated youth have their ambitions curtailed. This might explain why Kerala also has the highest suicide rates and liquor consumption statistics in the country. A big hope for the future is the recent boom in tourism, with Kerala emerging as one of India's most popular new tourist hot spots. So, thanks for coming, and congratulations on being a part of the solution.

AYURVEDA

The students at **Ayurveda College** (☎ 2460190; MG Rd; ☎ 8am-1pm) perform massage and general *panchakarma* (cleansing and purification) treatments (after consultation with a doctor) free of charge. Expect to wait in line, and expect Indian hospital, rather than Western resort-style, ambience.

Courses

Margi Kathakali School (☎ 2478806; Fort), behind Fort School, conducts courses in Kathakali (see the boxed text, p1011) and *kootiattam* for genuine students – absolute beginners as well as advanced. Fees average Rs 200 per 1½-hour class. Visitors can peek at the uncostumed practise sessions held 10am to noon Monday to Friday.

CVN Kalari Sangham (☎ 2474182; South Rd; ☎ 10am-1pm & 5-6.30pm) offers three-month courses (Rs 1000 per month) in *kalarippayat* (see boxed text, p1011) for serious students with some experience in martial arts. Contact **Sathyan** (☎ 2474182) for details. Daily **training sessions** (☎ 7-8.30am Mon-Sat) are open for public viewing.

Tours

KTDC offers tours, leaving from the **KTDC Hotel Chaitram** (Central Station Rd). The **Kanyakumari Day Tour** (per person Rs 250; ☎ 7.30am-9pm Tue-Sun) visits Padmanabhapuram Palace (p973), Kanyakumari (p1085) and the nearby Suchindram Temple. The **Thiruvananthapuram City Day Tour** (half-/full-day tours Rs 80/130) visits Trivandrum's major sights plus Kovalam beach (half-day 8.30am to 1pm, 2 to 7pm; full day 8.30am to 7pm). Avoid Mondays when some places are closed.

Sleeping**BUDGET**

The best hunting ground is along the quieter Manjalikulam Rd – streetside rooms in MG Rd hotels are very noisy.

Omkar Lodge (☎ 2451803; MG Rd; s/d Rs 130/230) While Omkar offers little more than cramped, bare rooms, it does throw in a free ration of mosquito cream every night! Rooms are clean enough, though the street noise isn't exactly a sweet lullaby.

Kukie's Holiday Inn (☎ 2478530; Lukes Lane; s/d Rs 150/325) This gem of a cheapie lies enveloped in golden, verdant silence at the end of a small lane. The rooms are very simple but thoughtfully maintained and offer frilly bits,

like wicker chairs and bright paintwork. Some of the best bang-for-buck around.

Pravin Tourist Home (☎ 2330443; Manjalikulam Rd; s/d Rs 170/253) Pravin's rooms are an outstanding example of our favourite Indian budget-hotel label: BBC (Basic But Clean).

Greenland Lodge (☎ 2328114; Thampanoor Jn; s/d Rs 184/276) Greenland greets you with lots of serenity-inducing pastel colours. Spick-and-span rooms are excellent value, have lots of space and come with hybrid squat/Western toilets. Best of all, it's efficiently run by smiling staff. You get free mosquito coils nightly.

YWCA International Guesthouse (☎ 2477308; 4th fl, MG Rd; s/d/tr Rs 250/350/450, d with AC Rs 600; ☎) While the rooms are a bit tattered around the edges, they're well kept and offer space in spades. Those facing away from the street are much quieter. They have a 10pm curfew, as well as the slowest elevators in all of India.

MIDRANGE

Homeland (☎ 2338415; Manjalikulam Rd; s/d Rs 350/490, with AC Rs 675/800; ☎) Homeland has spotless, austere rooms in a brand-spanking new hotel. It is characterless midrange quality for near budget prices.

Hotel Regency (☎ 2330377; www.hotelregency.com; Manjalikulam Cross Rd; s/d Rs 375/600, with AC Rs 800/950; ☎) With small, cosy rooms, a leafy entryway, lots of hush and plenty of smiles, this is an excellent choice for a good night's rest.

Manjalikulam Tourist Home (☎ 2330776; Manjalikulam Rd; s/d Rs 400/600, with AC Rs 700/750; ☎) The rooms here are massive and tidy but spartan, except for a few odd grandmotherly touches like pink floral curtains.

Hotel Highland Park (☎ 2338800; Manjalikulam Rd; s/d Rs 450/600, with AC Rs 750/850; ☎) This is relatively new and in very good nick, though the single rooms are really cramped. Don't mistake this for its older sister-hotel, Hotel Highland, across the road.

Wild Palms Home Stay (☎ 2471175; wildpalm@md3.vsnl.net.in; Mathrubhumi Rd; s Rs 895-1495, d Rs 1095-1895; ☎) The only pad in this price range that offers any real character – where else would you have a *Venus de Milo* statue greet you in the front garden? This lavish but comfortable family home has spacious rooms, handsome furniture and a friendly vibe (breakfast included).

Hotel Geeth (☎ 2471987; www.geethinternational.in; Ambujariyasam Rd; s/d from Rs 900/1500; ☎) Nothing too flash going on here, but the agreeable rooms all come with AC and lounge chairs, cable TV and

eager staff for good measure. The top-floor restaurant comes recommended.

Wild Palms On Sea (☎ 2756781; Puthenthope; s/d from Rs 1295/1595) A resort-style place about 20km from town on a secluded beach (Rs 350 by taxi), run by the same owners as Wild Palms Home Stay.

TOP END

KTDC Hotel Mascot (☎ 2318990; hotelmascot@vsnl.net; Mascot Sq; s/d from Rs 2400/2900; 📞 📺 📶) Lots of stylish period touches, massive hallways and an imposing reception area lend this place the sort of charisma missing from modern-mausoleum hotels. There's a monster pool and an Ayurvedic spa, and it's convenient for visits to the zoo, museums and galleries.

Muthoot Plaza (☎ 2337733; www.sarovarhotels.com; Punnen Rd; s/d from Rs 3300/3800, ste from Rs 6500; 📞 📺) In an unabashedly modern, cool-aqua glass tower, even the cheaper rooms are plush and top value. It's studiously focused on business travellers, with free breakfast and damned efficient service.

Eating

For some unusual refreshments with your meal, look out for *karikku* (coconut water) and *samb-haram* (buttermilk with ginger and chilli).

Ananda Bhavan (MG Rd; dishes Rs 15-20; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) This veg restaurant hones its skills on South Indian and tandoori dishes. It's a classic Keralan sit-down-and-dig-in-with-your-hands type situation.

Maveli Café (Central Station Rd; dishes Rs 15-45) Part of the Indian Coffee House chain, Maveli serves its standard tucker in a unique, narrow, four-storey spiralling tower lined by bench tables. Equal parts funhouse and Indian diner, it's a must-see. There's a traditional branch of Indian Coffee House (Museum Rd; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) opposite the zoo.

Kerala House Family Restaurant (Statue Rd; mains Rs 25-55) Don't expect much in the way of décor (think formica), but do expect one mean fish-curry masala (Rs 50). The fish *pollichathu* (baked in banana leaf), with ginger, vegetables and spices, is also top-notch.

Kalavara Family Restaurant (Press Rd; dishes Rs 30-105; 🍽️ lunch & dinner; 📞) A favourite of Trivandrum's middle class, this place does commendable lunchtime biryanis (Rs 41 to 75) and a range of Keralan fish dishes; the fish *molee* (fish pieces in coconut sauce, Rs 59) is excellent and there's atmospheric rooftop dining.

There are plenty of good places to eat near the bus and train stations:

Azad Restaurant (MG Rd; nonveg mains Rs 17-40)

Popular place with a juice bar attached.

Prime Square (Central Station Rd; mains from Rs 25) Keralan specialities and a great-value fish curry (Rs 28).

There's a choice of good hotel buffets at places like **Tiffany's Restaurant** (Muthoot Plaza; lunch Rs 350, dinner Rs 450) and **Regency** (MG Rd; buffet Rs 275) at the South Park Hotel. **Spencer's Daily** (MG Rd; 🍽️ 9am-9pm) is a well-stocked supermarket with lots of Western food, and even tampons!

Entertainment

Academy of Magical Sciences (☎ 2358910; www.magicmuthukad.com; Poojapurra) Ever wanted to learn how on earth they do that Indian rope trick? This is your chance. This academy works to preserve traditional Indian magic, give recognition to street magicians and train students in the art of illusion. It holds regular shows and has a shop selling magic kits. Fun.

For a quick Bolly- or Hollywood fix, try **Free Kumar Cinema** (☎ 2331222; Central Station Rd; admission Rs 30-35; 🍽️ 11am-11pm).

Shopping

Wander around Connemara Market to see vendors selling vegetables, fish, live goats, fabric, clothes, spices and more bananas than you've ever seen in one place.

Sankers Coffee & Tea (☎ 2330469; MG Rd; 🍽️ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) You'll smell the fresh coffee well before you reach this dainty little shop. It sells Nilgiri Export OP Leaf Tea (Rs 240 per kilogram) and a variety of coffee and nuts.

SMSM Institute (☎ 2330298; YMCA Rd; 🍽️ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Contrary to intuition, this place is not dedicated to the study of text messaging, but is a Kerala Government-run handicraft emporium with an Aladdin's den of reasonably priced goodies. A giant dancing-Shiva statue will greet you at the entrance.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Both **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2314781; Museum Rd; 🍽️ 10am-1pm & 1.45-5.35pm Mon-Sat) and **Jet Airways** (☎ 2728864; Sasthamangalam Junction; 🍽️ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) have offices in Trivandrum.

Jet Airways and Indian Airlines fly daily to Mumbai (Bombay, US\$262). **Air India** (☎ 2500585; International Airport; 🍽️ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) flies to Kochi (US\$115), while Indian Airlines

flies to Bengaluru (Bangalore, US\$162), Chennai (Madras, US\$157) and Delhi (US\$442).

There are regular flights from Trivandrum to Colombo and Male; see p1165.

All airline bookings can be made at the efficient **Airtravel Enterprises** (☎ 2334202; fax 2331704; New Corporation Bldg, MG Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-5pm Sun).

BUS

For buses operating from the **KSRTC bus stand** (☎ 2323886), opposite the train station, see the table below.

There's also a daily 8.45am bus to Thekkady (Rs 141, eight hours) for Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary.

For Tamil Nadu, State Express Transport Corporation (SETC) buses leave from the eastern end of the KSRTC bus stand for Chennai (Rs 306, 17 hours, eight daily) and Madurai (Rs 135, seven hours, nine daily). There's one daily bus at 3.45pm for Udthagamandalam (known as Ooty; Rs 258, 14 hours) and one at 2pm for Puducherry (Pondicherry, Rs 265, 16 hours).

Buses leave for Kovalam Beach (Rs 8, every 15 minutes) between 5.40am and 10pm from the southern end of the East Fort bus stand on MG Rd.

TRAIN

Trains are often heavily booked, so it's worth visiting the **reservation office** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun).

A bunch of trains run up the coast via Kollam and Ernakulam to Thrissur. Beyond Thrissur, many others branch off east via Palakkad (Palghat) to Tamil Nadu. You can travel to Coimbatore (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 194/514/728, 11 hours) for connections to Ooty.

BUSES FROM TRIVANDRUM (KSRTC BUS STAND)

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Alleppey	90	3½	every 15min
Kanyakumari	40	2	6 daily
Kochi	124	5	every 15min
Kollam	42	1½	every 15min
Neyyar Dam	20	1½	every 40min
Thrissur	168	7½	every 30min
Varkala	32	1¼	hourly

Trains that travel up the coast as far as Mangalore in Karnataka include the daily *Parasuram Express* (2nd class/AC chair Rs 154/547, 16 hours, 6.35am) and *Malabar Express* (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 261/705/1000, 6.30pm).

There are frequent trains to Varkala (2nd class/AC chair Rs 24/142, around 45 minutes), Kollam (Rs 31/167, 1¼ hours) and Ernakulam (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 60/335/470, 4½ hours), with three passing through Alleppey (2nd class/AC chair Rs 47/180, three hours). There are daily services to Calicut (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 190/505/716, 11 hours) and Kanyakumari (Rs 131/213/291, two hours).

Getting Around

The **airport** (☎ 2501537) is 6km from the city and 15km from Kovalam; take local bus 14 from the East Fort bus stand (Rs 5). Prepaid taxi vouchers from the airport cost Rs 206 to the city and Rs 313 to Kovalam.

Autorickshaws patrol the streets and are the easiest transport around the city. Standard rates (assuming you can convince drivers to use the meter) are Rs 10 flagfall, then Rs 5 per kilometre, but all rules go out the window at night – 50% over the meter is fair. Agree on a fare beforehand. A cheap way to get around is to hop on and off any of the crowded buses plying the length of MG Rd (Rs 3).

AROUND TRIVANDRUM

Neyyar Dam Sanctuary

This **sanctuary** (☎ 2272182; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), 32km north of Trivandrum, is set around an idyllic lake created by the 1964 Neyyar dam. The verdant forest lining the shoreline is home to gaurs, sambar deer, sloth, elephants, lion-tailed macaques and the occasional tiger.

The sanctuary office organises 40-minute **lion safaris** (Rs 250 per car, plus Rs 10 each for guide), though you're more likely to see monkeys than big cats. For improved spotting opportunities it's better to sneak around on a three-hour guided **trek** (Indian/foreigner Rs 400/800 per group of up to 10 people). There's a **Crocodile Protection Centre** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/10) nearby and you can go for a dip in the lake's pristine waters (Rs 50). The **elephant rehabilitation centre** (Kappukadu; ☎ 9am-5pm), 7km up the road, offers 30-minute rides for Rs 100.

You can get here by frequent bus from Trivandrum (Rs 16, 1½ hours). A taxi costs

Rs 650 return (with two hours waiting time) and a very bumpy rickshaw costs half that.

Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Dhanwantari Ashram

Just before Neyyar Dam, this **ashram** (☎ /fax 0471-2273093; www.sivananda.org/ndam), established in 1978, is renowned for its hatha yoga courses. Courses run for a minimum of two weeks and cost Rs 650 per day for accommodation in a double room (Rs 450 in dormitories). Low season (April to October) rates are Rs 100 less. There's an exacting schedule (6am to 10pm) of yoga practise, meditation and chanting; and students rave about the food (included in the rates). Prior bookings are required. Month-long yoga-teacher training and Ayurvedic massage courses are also available – it's often best to go when one of these is running.

KOVALAM

☎ 0471

The frenzied beachfront development, bloated prices and indefatigable souvenir-sellers of Kovalam are almost worth putting up with for its lovely slice of sand and perfectly swaying palms. Permanently tattooed on European charter-group itineraries, these days there is little room left for the budgeteers that pioneered India's tourism industry. Nevertheless, Kovalam clings to some remnants of charm, particularly once you step off the main-beach drag into the rice paddies and palm groves that stretch far inland. It can be a good place to kick back for a few days, particularly during quieter times.

Orientation

Kovalam consists of two coves (Lighthouse Beach and Hawah Beach) separated from less-populated beaches north and south by rocky headlands. The town proper is at Kovalam Junction, about 1.5km from the beaches.

Information

Just about every shop and hotel wants to change your money, but ask around for the best rate. There are Federal Bank and ICICI ATMs at Kovalam Junction. There are also plenty of small, uniformly slow internet places charging Rs 30 to 50 per hour and lots of STD/ISD facilities around.

Bookshop (☎ 7am-11pm) A good range of books to rent/buy/exchange, underneath the German Bakery.

Post office (☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Sat)

Top Shop Cyber Cafe (per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9.30am-midnight) Off the beach up a steep hill, this is the only serious internet joint.

Tourist facilitation centre (☎ 2480085; ☎ 10am-5pm) Very helpful, inside the entrance to the Kovalam Beach Resort.

United Books (NUP Beach Rd; ☎ 9am-9pm) A kooky collection of books on Kerala, Indian spirituality and English-language trash lit.

Upasana Hospital (☎ 2480632; ☎ 9.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9.30m-12pm Sun) Has two English-speaking doctors who can take care of minor injuries.

Dangers & Annoyances

Women are likely to grow tired of the parade of male Indian daytrippers who stroll along the beach in the hope of glimpsing female flesh – it's more annoying than dangerous, however. Theft does occur, both from hotels and the beach. Lock the doors and windows and watch your possessions at the beach.

There are strong rips at both ends of Lighthouse Beach that carry away several swimmers every year. Swim only between the flags in the area patrolled by lifeguards.

Kovalam has frequent blackouts and the footpaths further back behind Lighthouse Beach are unlit, so carry a torch (flashlight) after dark.

Sleeping

Kovalam is bumper to bumper with hotels, though budget places cost more than usual and are fewer in number every year. Beachfront properties are the most expensive and have great sea views, but many of these cater to package groups. There are lots of better-value, smaller places tucked away in the labyrinth of paths behind the beach among palm groves and rice paddies.

Prices quoted are for the November to March high season; outside of these times expect huge discounts. During the Christmas and New Year rush savvy owners double their prices. Rooms offered are usually doubles, though single travellers often bargain a small discount.

BUDGET

Pink Flower (☎ 2383908; dRs 250) It's worth seeking this place out, at least for the look of surprise on friendly Mr Sadanandan's face that you managed to find his little guesthouse. Tucked well away in the palms behind several hotels,

this lovingly kept place has several humble, spotless rooms that may just be the cheapest digs in Kovalam.

Hotel Holiday Home (☎ 2486382; d Rs 300-800) This great place has spacious, if a bit dark, bungalow-style rooms facing each other over a small garden. There's a tangible chill-out vibe, helped along by its tranquil setting in a maze of paths behind the main beach. It's popular with long-term travellers.

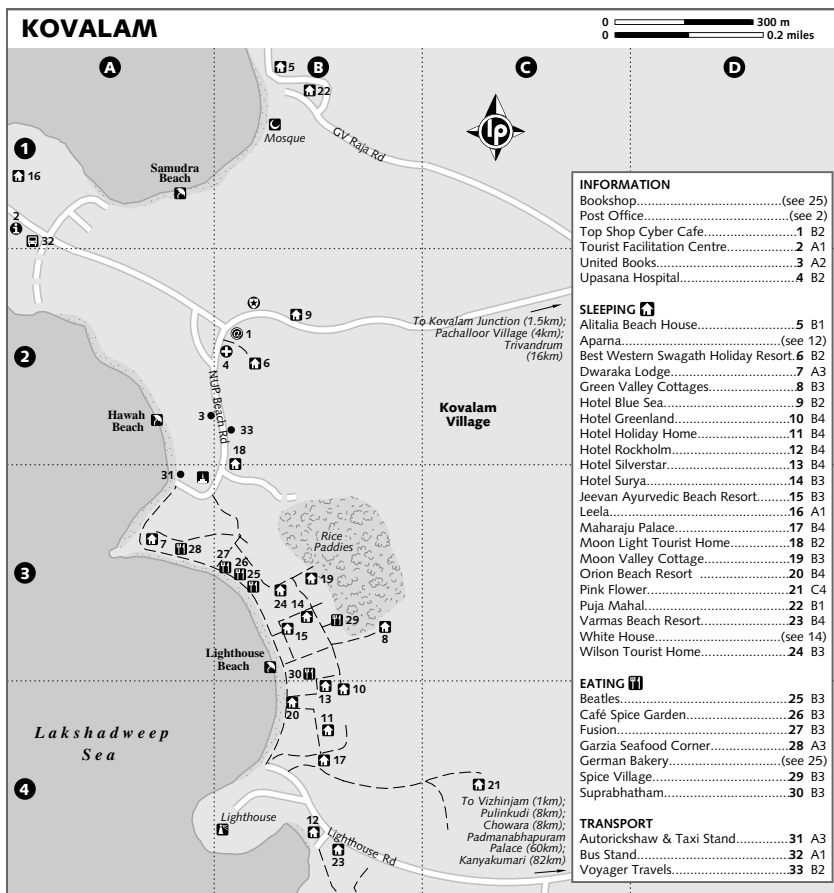
Hotel Surya (☎ 2481012; kovsurya@yahoo.co.in; d downstairs/upstairs Rs 350/500, with AC Rs 1200; ♿) This run-of-the-mill place has small, dark, downstairs rooms and bigger upstairs ones with TV, fridge and a communal balcony.

Dwaraka Lodge (☎ 2480411; d Rs 400) This concrete building is a little grimy, but inside you

get clean sheets, a loo and a room with ocean views. What more do you want at this price?

Moon Valley Cottage (☎ 9847049643; sknairkovalam@yahoo.com; d from Rs 400, upstairs apt per week Rs 5000) There's nothing but swaying palms all the way back here, and this place makes the most of it with a thatched-roof, top-floor hang-out where you can practically reach out and fondle the coconuts. The rooms are typically basic and clean.

Green Valley Cottages (☎ 2480636; indira_ravi@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 500/600) Also way back in the paddy fields, this serene spot is the place to revel in serious hush time. The rooms are ruthlessly austere, perfect for monks-in-training looking to escape pesky distractions like room furnishings.



LUNGI OR DHOTI?

No, it's not a dress, or a kilt, or a frock the men in Kerala are all wearing, it's called a lungi. Made from cotton and patterned in different designs, men sporting lungis are a common sight in southern India, as well as in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The lungi is traditionally a colourful piece of fabric, often sewn together to form a tube, and knotted around the waist. It comes in many colours and is worn mostly as casual dress. If the lungi is white, it's called *mundu*, which is worn at formal occasions like weddings. Men will fold their lungi or *mundu* in half while working or during hot weather (ie most of the time), though this is never done in formal situations. Interestingly, Muslim men wear their lungi tucked to the left, while Hindus and Christians wear theirs to the right.

Now before you think you're an expert on the subject, don't get this confused with the dhoti (called a *vesthi* in Kerala), which is a white, open rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and worn throughout India on official occasions. It is generally acceptable for foreigners to wear a lungi/*mundu*/*vesthi*/dhoti. Try it out – there's nothing like having a cool breeze running between your legs on a scorching Kerala day.

Wilson Tourist Home (☎ 9847363831; d Rs 500-900, with AC Rs 1300 incl breakfast; ♿ ♿) Wilson has large courtyard rooms set around a garden, with swing chairs on the balconies and Keralan darkwood touches. The cheaper rooms aren't much to write home about.

White House (☎ 3091963; whitehousekovalam@walla.com; d Rs 600) Next door to Hotel Surya, this is a clone offering 'same-same but different'.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Silverstar (☎ 2482983; www.silverstar-kovalam.com; d incl breakfast Rs 600-800) Fresh from a round of renovations, the spick-and-span rooms here have enough space to swing at least two cats. The hotel's set back in the heart of the village, which means it's quiet, but the large balconies don't have much of a view. Mosquito nets are provided and there's a roof terrace.

Hotel Greenland (☎ 2486442; hotelgreenlandin@yahoo.com; s/d Rs 600/800) The humungous refurbished rooms in this multilevel complex sport natural light and small kitchenettes for self-catering. It's a very friendly place that cooks up yummy food on request.

Maharaju Palace (☎ 2485320; www.maharajupalace.in; d Rs 1100) More of a quiet retreat than a palace, this boutiquey place has far more character than anything else in its class. The few medium-sized rooms are decorated with artsy touches and have a large shared balcony sporting comfortable lounging chairs. There's a charming, secluded little garden out the front.

Aparna (☎ 2480950; s/d Rs 1250/1500) Immediately behind Hotel Rockholm, this is similar

and has slightly better-kept rooms, but with less character.

Hotel Rockholm (☎ 2480306; www.rockholm.com; Lighthouse Rd; s/d Rs 1350/1500, with AC Rs 1850/2000; ♿ ♿) Overlooking crashing waves and near a secluded beach, this place clings to leftover '80s chic. AC rooms are slightly bigger and have romantic window seats.

Varma Beach Resort (☎ 2480478; www.calanguetebeach.com; Lighthouse Rd; d Rs 1500, with AC Rs 2500; ♿) This is the best-looking place in Kovalam, with a Kerala-style façade, rooms with wooden furniture and rattan sitting areas on the balconies. Throw in some exceptional views and access to an isolated beach and shazam – we have a winner!

Jeevan Ayurvedic Beach Resort (☎ 2480662; www.jeevanresort.com; d Rs 2100-3500; ♿ ♿) This resort has a great burnt-orange/blue colour scheme, decent-sized rooms with bathtubs and an alluring pool that practically plays footsie with the ocean.

Also recommended:

Orion Beach Resort (☎ 2480999; www.orionbeachresort.com; d downstairs/upstairs Rs 700/1500) Your rupees pay for the balconies with awesome seaviews, but there's not much left over for anything more than rudimentary rooms.

Moon Light Tourist Home (☎ 2480375; moonlight@satyam.net.in; d Rs 1500, with AC Rs 1750; ♿ ♿) Friendly place with a dash of character and a few great balcony rooms. Nonguests can use the pool for Rs 150.

Hotel Blue Sea (☎ 2480555; www.hotelblueseas.net; r Rs 1000-2500, with AC Rs 3500; ♿ ♿) Something different: great rooms inside circular, three-storey towers with polished floors and round verandas.

TOP END

Best Western Swagath Holiday Resort (☎ 2481148; www.swagathresorts.com; r Rs 1400-3600, with AC Rs 1800-4000, ste Rs 6000; ♿ ♿ ♿) Set in a cultivated, fairytale-perfect garden overlooking coconut palms. The rooms are big and well furnished, but with a whiff of the chain hotel about them. The place is kid-friendly, with a small playground and kiddie pool, and there is one ridiculously charming garden villa (Rs 2000), complete with white picket fence.

Leela (previously Kovalam Beach Resort; ☎ 2480101; www.theleela.com; s/d from US\$295/320, ste from Rs 9000; ♿ ♿) This hotel is glamorously located around extensive grounds on the headland north of Hawah Beach. There are three (three!) swimming pools, an Ayurvedic centre, gym and all the luxury you'd expect for the price. Rooms aren't huge, but are sumptuously decorated with colourful textiles and Keralan artwork.

Eating

Open-air restaurants line the beach area displaying the catch of the day nightly – just pick a fish, settle on a price (per serve around Rs 150, tiger prawns over Rs 400) and decide how you want it prepared. Menus and prices are indistinguishable, so it's more about which ambience takes your fancy. Restaurant are open from around 7.30am to midnight.

Suprabhatham (meals Rs 45-75) This vegetarian place dishes up excellent, dirt-cheap and truly authentic Keralan cooking. It's secluded and intimate, out in the palm groves with an option to dine under the stars to a nightly orchestra of crickets.

Garzia Seafood Corner (mains Rs 50-200) Long-term visitors rate this lime-green place as a reasonable seafood option.

Spice Village (dishes Rs 50-220) A romantic lily-pond oasis, this place calls itself 'traditional Keralan', though the requisite pasta and Chinese dishes make their cameo appearances. Nevertheless, it does some excellent Keralan seafood, like its fish *pollichathu* (marinated fish wrapped in a banana leaf and grilled, Rs 130).

Beatles (mains Rs 60-180) Offering the usual Kovalam food suspects, what sets Beatles apart is the funky gnarled wood décor, with vines dripping from every corner. The jungle continues upstairs with awesome sea views to boot.

Café Spice Garden (mains Rs 60-300) Modishly decked out in brightly coloured cushions,

there's a wide-ranging menu that includes a dangerously long list of cocktails. The seafood gets particularly good reports.

German Bakery (mains Rs 80-160) The most popular breakfast hang-out, this rooftop bakery has a winning range of breakfasts, strong coffee, fresh pastries, quiches and a varied selection of main courses, including stir-fried tofu (Rs 100) and seafood pizza (Rs 140). We love its version of the French breakfast: croissant, café au lait and a cigarette (Rs 60).

Fusion (mains Rs 90-200) This funky pad has an inventive menu where East meets West – and they even seem to get along pretty well. Its fusion dishes have Indian and continental choices colliding to form yummy new taste combinations.

Entertainment

During the high season, a shortened version of Kathakali is performed most nights somewhere – inquire about locations and times from the Tourist Facilitation Centre (p969). The intricate make-up process starts at around 5pm, the performance around 6.30pm. On weekends cultural programmes involving music and dance are sometimes performed on the beach – look out for signs.

Western videos are shown twice a night in some restaurants. Dedicated bars are thin on the ground, but beer is available in most of the restaurants (around Rs 80) and some serve cocktails (Rs 80 to 100) to an endless soundtrack of reggae, trance and classic rock.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

There are local buses between Kovalam and Trivandrum every 20 minutes between 5.30am and 9.30pm (Rs 8, 30 minutes); catch them from the entrance to Leela resort. Buses to Ernakulum leave at 6am, 6.30am and 2.30pm (Rs 125, 5½ hours), stopping at Kallambalam (for Varkala, Rs 38, 1½ hours), Kollam (Rs 47, 2½ hours) and Alleppey (Rs 92, four hours).

TAXI & AUTORICKSHAW

A taxi between Trivandrum and Kovalam Beach is Rs 250. Autorickshaws should be around Rs 100, depending on the season. Prepaid taxis from Trivandrum airport to Lighthouse Beach cost Rs 313.

A great way to get around to remote beaches is on your own wheels. **Voyager Travels** (☎ 2485217) rents out scooters/Enfields for

around Rs 450/550 per day – though its opening hours can be unpredictable.

AROUND KOVALAM

Samudra Beach

Samudra Beach, about 4km north of Kovalam by road, has a couple of resorts jostling for space with local fishing villages. Although more peaceful, the steep and rough beach is not as good for swimming.

Alitalia Beach House (☎ 2480042; s/d Rs 600/1000)

The unique, octagonal rooms here have neat furniture, poster beds with mosquito nets, rooftop seating and windows on six sides – perfect for that fresh ocean breeze.

Puja Mahal (☎ 2481245; www.hotelpujamahal.com; s/d Rs 2000/2500; 🍷 🍷) This new hotel has made some rather curious interior-design decisions – concrete, jungle scenes anyone? The rooms are perfectly comfortable, but the star attraction remains the refreshing pool.

Pulinkudi & Chowara

Around 8km south of Kovalam are some luxury alternatives to Kovalam's crowded beaches.

Dr Franklin's Panchakarma Institute (☎ 2480870; www.dr-franklin.com; Chowara; s €15-50, d €20-65; 🏠) For those serious about Ayurvedic treatment, this is a reputable and less expensive alternative to some flashier resorts. Daily treatment costs €35, with a full meal plan an additional €16. Accommodation is clean and comfortable but not resort style (though sea-view rooms are available). Options include packages for spine problems and slimming, as well as general rejuvenation and stress relief.

Thapovan Heritage Home (☎ 2480453; www.thapovan.com; s/d Rs 3000/3850) This is the way to live the simple life (no pool, AC, TV) in the complete luxury of gorgeous Keralan teak cottages filled with handcrafted furniture. It's set among perfectly manicured grounds that roll down a hillside and overlook acres of swaying palm groves. Ayurvedic treatments available range from one-hour massages to 28-day treatment marathons. It's a few kilometres from the nearest beach.

Bethsaida Hermitage (☎ 2267554; www.bethsaida-c.org; Pulinkudi; r €55-80) A resort with a difference: this is a charitable organisation that helps support a nearby orphanage. As a bonus, it's also a luxurious beachside escape, with rolling, sculpted gardens, seductively slung hammocks, palms galore and shade in spades.

It offers a variety of cottages, from rainbow-painted, half-ovals scattered down a hillside, to spacious, cool Kerala-style huts.

Surya Samudra Beach Garden (☎ 2480413; www.surya-samudra.com; Pulinkudi; r incl breakfast €120-350; 🍷 🍷) This luscious, small resort has six types of cottages, many of which are constructed from transplanted traditional Keralan houses, with spectacular carved ceilings and open-air bathrooms. There are private beaches, an infinity pool and Ayurvedic treatments – all on 21 acres of wonderfully cultivated grounds.

PADMANABHAPURAM PALACE

With several large lumberyards worth of carved ceilings and polished-teak beams, this **palace** (admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 25/1200; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is considered the best example of traditional Keralan architecture today. Parts of it date back to 1550, though as the egos of successive rulers left their mark, it expanded into the magnificent conglomeration of 14 palaces it is today.

The largest wooden palace complex in Asia, it was once the seat of the rulers of Travancore, a princely state taking in parts of Tamil Nadu as well as Kerala. Fetchingly constructed of teak and granite, the exquisite interiors include rosewood ceilings carved in floral patterns, Chinese-influenced screens, and floors finished to a high-black polish. Getting one of the English-speaking guides that hang around inside the gate is worthwhile (around Rs 50 to 100).

Padmanabhapuram is around 60km southeast of Kovalam. Catch a local bus from Kovalam (or Trivandrum) to Kanyakumari and get off at Thuckalay, from where it's a short autorickshaw ride or 15-minute walk. Alternatively, take one of the tours organised by the KTDC (see p966), or hire a taxi (about Rs 1000 return).

VARKALA

☎ 0470 / 📞 42,273

The sensational cliffs of Varkala might just be its saving grace, holding back the kind of development that has left nearby Kovalam gasping for air. With a strand of golden beach nuzzling the cliff edge, and more Bob Marley music that you can poke a dreadlocked backpacker at, the vibe here remains faithfully laid-back. Varkala's beaches are protected by soaring bluffs, while all the on-land action is perched precariously, but beautifully, along

the crumbling precipice above. Sure, the number of new hotels is creeping up each year, but it's still a great place to while away the days, even weeks, with tonnes of sleeping options and some excellent dining spots (with dramatic, cliffside sunsets on the house).

Orientation & Information

The main beach is accessed from either Beach Rd, or by several steep stairways cut into the north cliff. The town and the train station are about 2km from the beach. There's a State Bank of India ATM in Varkala town and there are plenty of slow internet places along the cliff top (around Rs 40 per hour) – save your emails often as power cuts are not uncommon.

Bureau de Change (☎ 2606623; Temple Junction; ☹ 9am-7pm) Cashes travellers cheques, does credit-card cash advances, and is helpful for bus and train times.

Police aid post (☎ Nov-Feb) At the helipad.

Post office (☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Sat) North of Temple Junction.

Dangers & Annoyances

The beaches at Varkala have very strong currents; even experienced swimmers have been

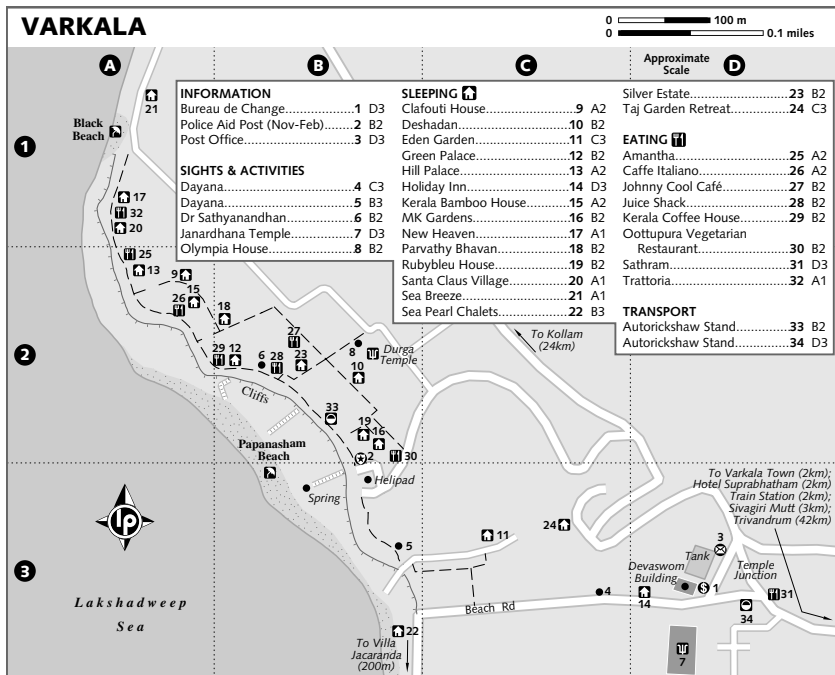
swept away. This is one of the most dangerous beaches in Kerala, so be careful and swim between the flags or ask the lifeguards for the best place to swim.

Indian male gawkers are starting to discover the bikini-clad attractions at Varkala. However, with police patrolling beaches to keep male starrers a-walkin' and the hawkers at bay, there had been no serious incidents when we were there. It still pays to dress sensitively, especially if you're going into Varkala town.

It seems like every man and his dog has an Ayurvedic-related product to sell, from treatments, to massage, to Ayurvedic tea and even Ayurvedic toilets. Most people aren't qualified practitioners – it's best to ask for recommendations before you go get herbalised (see opposite). Women should always be treated by a female practitioner.

Sights & Activities

Varkala is a temple town, and **Janardhana Temple** is the main event – its technicolour Hindu spectacle sits hovering above Beach Rd. It's closed to non-Hindus, but you may be invited into the temple grounds where there is a huge



banyan tree and shrines to Ayyappan, Hanuman and other Hindu deities.

Sivagiri Mutt (☎ 2602807; www.sivagiri.org) is the headquarters of the Sree Narayana Dharma Sanghom Trust, the ashram devoted to Sree Narayana Guru (1855–1928), Kerala's most prominent guru. This is a popular pilgrimage site and the swami is happy to talk to visitors. If you're serious about studying meditation and philosophy here, it's possible to stay (rooms Rs 200 to 250).

Practically everyone offers Ayurveda, yoga or massage (see also Dangers & Annoyances, opposite). A recommended place for Ayurvedic beauty treatments is **Dayana** (☎ 2609464; manicure & pedicure Rs 250, facials Rs 400-1000; ☎ 9am-7pm), which has a shack on the beach and a shop on Beach Rd (women only). Mr Omanakuttan at **Olympia House** (☎ 3291783) is a qualified massage instructor, in both Ayurveda and other schools, and has an excellent reputation. His wife sees female clients. **Eden Garden** (☎ 2603910; www.eden-garden.net), a popular Ayurvedic resort, offers single treatments and packages; see p976 for accommodation details. Readers also have good things to say about **Dr Sathyanandhan** (☎ 2602950; smAyurveda@hotmail.com), near Seaview. Single massage treatments cost between Rs 500 and Rs 900.

For tabla (traditional drum) lessons contact **Mr Venu** (☎ 9895473304), who has been playing and teaching for 15 years and will come to your residence for banging instructions (Rs 250 to 300 per hour).

Boogie boards can be rented from places along the beach for Rs 100, but be wary of very strong currents (see Dangers & Annoyances, opposite).

Sleeping

Most places to stay are along the north cliff; some open only for the tourist onslaught in November. The quieter places are either inland or at the far northern end of the cliff; although the number of guesthouses is inexorably increasing here, too. Prices given are average high-season (November to March) rates, which fluctuate wildly with the ebb and flow of demand – expect astronomical prices around the Christmas holidays and bargains in the off season.

The commission racket is alive and well – make sure that your rickshaw takes you to the place you've asked for.

BUDGET

Rubybleu House (☎ 9995040495; www.rubybleuhouse.com; dm Rs 75, s/d Rs 200/300) This gem of a guesthouse has basic, colourful rooms in a rambling house deep among the palm groves. There's a small jungle/garden with rare plants from around the world and the friendly hippy vibe is administered by the very informative Leon and his partner Katalin (who's a qualified reiki instructor). They have an awesome 6000-CD music collection and an eclectic Buddhist/rock-and-roll library. Long-termers love this place.

AYURVEDA

With its roots in Sanskrit, the word Ayurveda is derived from *ayu* (life) and *veda* (knowledge); it is the knowledge or science of life. Principles of Ayurvedic medicine were first documented in the Vedas some 2000 years ago, but it may even have been practised centuries earlier.

Ayurveda sees the world as having an intrinsic order and balance. It argues that we possess three *doshas* (humours): *vata* (wind or air); *pitta* (fire); and *kapha* (water/earth). Known together as the *tridoshas*, deficiency or excess in any of them can result in disease – an excess of *vata* may result in dizziness and debility; an increase in *pitta* may lead to fever, inflammation and infection. *Kapha* is essential for hydration.

Ayurvedic treatment aims to restore the balance, and hence good health, principally through two methods: *panchakarma* (internal purification) and massage. The herbs used for both grow in abundance in Kerala's moist climate, and every village has its own Ayurvedic pharmacy.

Having an occasional Ayurvedic massage, something offered at tourist resorts all over Kerala, is relaxing, but you have to go in for the long haul to reap any real benefits – usually 15 days or longer. Expect a thorough examination followed by an appropriate Ayurvedic diet, exercises and a range of treatments, as well as regular massages.

If you want to learn more, pick up a copy of *Ayurveda: Life, Health & Longevity* by Dr Robert E Svoboda, or check out www.ayur.com.

Silver Estate (☎ 9387755309; mohdrafi20@rediffmail.com; s/d Rs 250/300) Silver Estate gets rave reviews for the friendliness of its staff. It has typically basic rooms with hammocks out the front, and is back far enough from the beach to be blissfully quiet. There's a child-care centre run from here during the high season.

MK Gardens (☎ 2603298; mkgarden_2005@yahoo.com; r Rs 250-300) In a massive house well off Varkala's 'Vegas strip,' the rooms are plain but enormous, with palm-top views that come together to spell 'good budget value'.

New Heaven (☎ 2156338; newheavenbeachresort@yahoo.com; r Rs 500-700) Just back from the northern cliffs, New Heaven has easy access to Black Beach and great top-floor views. Rooms are tidy and have big, blue bathrooms.

Kerala Bamboo House (☎ 9895270993; www.keralabamboohouse.com; huts Rs 700-800) For a slightly upmarket bamboo-hut experience, this wonderful place has dozens of pretty, Balinese-style huts with handsome interiors of antique wood and painted bamboo. Cooking classes are run nightly (Rs 500), there are culture shows and yoga classes in the Kerala-styled pavilion.

Also recommended:

Parvathy Bhavan (☎ 2602596; d Rs 300-400) An elementary homestay with bare, tiled rooms popular with the ultra-budget brigade.

Holiday Inn (r Rs 300-400) Clean, plain rooms near the tank with – wait for it – holy water straight from the tap!

MIDRANGE

Eden Garden (☎ 2603910; www.eden-garden.net; d Rs 800-1200) Delightfully situated overlooking silent paddy fields, this place has a few small, orderly and well-decorated double rooms set around a lush lilypond. There are dining gazebos on stilts over the pools and an Ayurvedic resort (see above). You'll need to lather yourself in mosquito repellent by night.

Santa Claus Village (☎ 9249121464; www.santaclausvillageresort.com; s Rs 900-1700, d Rs 1400-1900, s/d with AC Rs 2000/2200; ☎ ☎) Even though the cheesy name is only funny once a year, this place is surprisingly well designed, with traditional Kerala-themed buildings, nice bits of furniture and lots of teak-wood flair. The two deluxe rooms come with huge bay windows facing out to sea.

Green Palace (☎ 2610055; greenpalace@eth.net; s/d from Rs 1000/1200, with AC Rs 2400/3000; ☎) The Palace's rooms, while big and orderly, are nondescript and don't really follow through

on the façade's promises of luxury. There's a trim lawn leading down to the cliff edge, illuminated at night by a brash runway of coloured fairylights.

Sea Pearl Chalets (☎ 2605875; seapearlvarkala@hotmail.com; d Rs 1250) Precariously dangling off the southern cliffs of Varkala, these small but charismatic concrete wigwags boast unbeatable views. They're definitely worth checking out before they tumble into the ocean.

Sea Breeze (☎ 2603257; www.seabreezevarkala.com; r Rs 1500, with AC Rs 2500; ☎) The large and orderly rooms in this hefty building all offer great sea views and share a large veranda – perfect for nightly sunset adulation. The friendly owners have their restaurant under a beachside coconut grove.

Also recommended:

Clafouti House (☎ 2601414; www.clafouti.com; d Rs 700-900) Intimate, homey atmosphere, with bright double rooms straight out of the '80s.

Hill Palace (☎ 2610142; www.hillpalace.com; d Rs 800) Chintzy but always clean and freshly painted, with balconies facing the ocean.

Deshadan (☎ 3204242; www.deshadan.com; r ind breakfast Rs 3000; ☎ ☎) In a notable, burnt-red complex with rooms decorated in themes from regions of India.

TOP END

Villa Jacaranda (☎ 2610296; www.villa-jacaranda.biz; d Rs 3300-4400) The ultimate in understated luxury, this romantic retreat has several huge, bright, beautiful rooms with balconies, individually decorated with a chic blend of modern and period touches. Front rooms have sea views; the roof-terrace room is really impressive.

Taj Garden Retreat (☎ 2603000; www.tajhotels.com; r US\$120-145; ☎ ☎ ☎) Luxury, '80s-style: this opulent but slightly dated resort has big rooms, an Ayurvedic centre, bar and health club. The Sunday lunch buffet (12.30pm to 3pm; Rs 400) is deservedly popular – particularly since you get to use the pool. Cocktails all round, then!

Eating

Restaurants in Varkala are open from around 7.30am to midnight and offer pretty much the same mix of Indian, Asian and Western fare. It's best to join in the nightly Varkala cliff-side saunter till you find a place that suits your mood.

Oottupura Vegetarian Restaurant (mains from Rs 30) Bucking the trend and serving only veggie options, this great budget restaurant has a respectable range of dishes, including breakfast

puttu (wheat and coconut flour with milk, bananas and honey, Rs 35).

Juice Shack (juices Rs 50, snacks Rs 30-100; ☎ 7am-7.30pm) A funky little health-juice bar that doubles as Varkala's own intranet, where long-termers come to gossip and share the latest news the old way.

Kerala Coffee House (breakfast/mains around Rs 50/100) With oodles of atmosphere and top service, this perennially popular hang-out has tableclothed dining under the swaying palms (221 days since the last coconut-related injury at time of writing). It serves cocktails (around Rs 70) and has particularly tasty pizzas (Rs 70 to 90), all served to a dancy, reggae soundtrack.

Johnny Cool Café (meals Rs 60-150) Run by dreadlocked hipster Manu, this place serves superb Western and Indian food – but be warned, it may take a while to come out. Quite a while if Manu has to run down to the market to grab ingredients. It's always worth the wait, however; there's no set menu so just turn up and ask what's going.

Trattoria (meals Rs 70-150) This friendly and efficient Tibetan-managed place does some of the most consistently well-prepared Western food in town (lasagne in particular, Rs 80 to 105). Meals from the other directions of the compass ain't bad either.

Also recommended:

Sathram (Temple Junction; meals Rs 20-30) Eat with the autorickshaw drivers at this no-frills Kerala diner.

Caffe Italiano (meals Rs 40-200) Leafy, vine-side dining.

Amantha (thalis Rs 30, meals Rs 50-100) A tiny, barely standing family-run hut.

Culinary adventurers should ask around town about certain Varkalan households that prepare outstanding home-cooked meals on request.

Drinking

Although most of the places along the cliff aren't licensed, most will serve beer (around Rs 70), sometimes in a discreet teapot and with a watchful eye for patrolling police.

Entertainment

Kathakali performances are organised during December and January; look out for signs advertising location and times.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent trains to Trivandrum (2nd class/AC chair Rs 24/142, 45 minutes) and

Kollam (Rs 20/142, 35 minutes), and three a day to Alleppey (Rs 38/155, two hours). It's easy to get to Kollam in time for the morning backwater boat to Alleppey (see the boxed text, p982). From Temple Junction, four daily buses go to/from Trivandrum (Rs 36, 1½ hours) and one express bus goes to Kollam at 11.15am (Rs 34, one hour). Many slower buses also head to Kollam, or alternatively you can catch a bus or autorickshaw to the highway junction 7km away for more frequent express buses rumbling north.

Getting Around

An autorickshaw between the train station and the beach is Rs 30 to 40, a taxi about Rs 60. Beware that many drivers will try to shoehorn you into the hotel that pays them the highest commission – it's often best to be dropped off at the Helipad and walk to your chosen hotel. Many places along the cliff-top rent Enfields/scooters for Rs 350/250 per day.

KOLLAM (QUILON)

☎ 0474 / pop 379,975

Kollam is a tranquil trading town and the secret southern approach to Kerala's backwaters. One of the oldest ports in the Arabian Sea, it was once a major commerce hub that saw Roman, Arab, Chinese and later Portuguese, Dutch and British traders jostle ships into port, eager to get their hands on spices and the region's valuable cashew crops. The town's shady streets and antediluvian market are worth a wander, and the calm waterways of the surrounding Ashtamudi Lake are still fringed with coconut palms, cashew plantations and traditional villages.

Information

There are a couple of ATMs around town.

Cyber Zone (☎ 2766566; per hr Rs 15; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) The fastest of the numerous internet cafés at the Bishop Jerome Nagar Complex.

DTPC information centre (☎ 2745625; contact@dtpckollam.com; ☎ 8.30am-7pm) Very helpful; near the KSRTC bus stand.

Post office (☎ 2746607)

UAE Exchange (☎ 2751240; Tourist Bungalow Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun)

Sights

The lively **Shrine of Our Lady of Velankanni** is dedicated to a patron saint from neighbouring Tamil Nadu. There aren't many places in the

world you can see sari-clad Christian iconography worshipped with such Hindu exuberance. On the next street south, the **Mukkada Bazaar** has been a commercial hub of activity for hundreds of years. Here, spice merchants sit atop bags of bright powders, porters ferry goods deftly on their heads and shop fronts are draped in mysterious herbs (many used for Ayurvedic treatments).

At **Kollam Beach** you can stroll past picturesque Kerala fishing hamlets, where fishermen mend nets and dozens of fishing boats colour the shoreline. There's a rowdy **fish market** here, where customers and fisherfolk alike pontificate on the value of the catch of the day – get there early in the morning. The beach is 2km south of town, a Rs 20 rickshaw ride away.

The **Police Museum** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a random collection of old uniforms, dusty muskets, and a macabre room displaying photographs of violent-crime victims. It's not for everyone, but the 100-year-old banyan tree sprouting from a well out the back is impressive, and 100% gore-free.

The **Pooram festival** (April) is held in Kollam annually, while the **Ashtamudi Craft and**

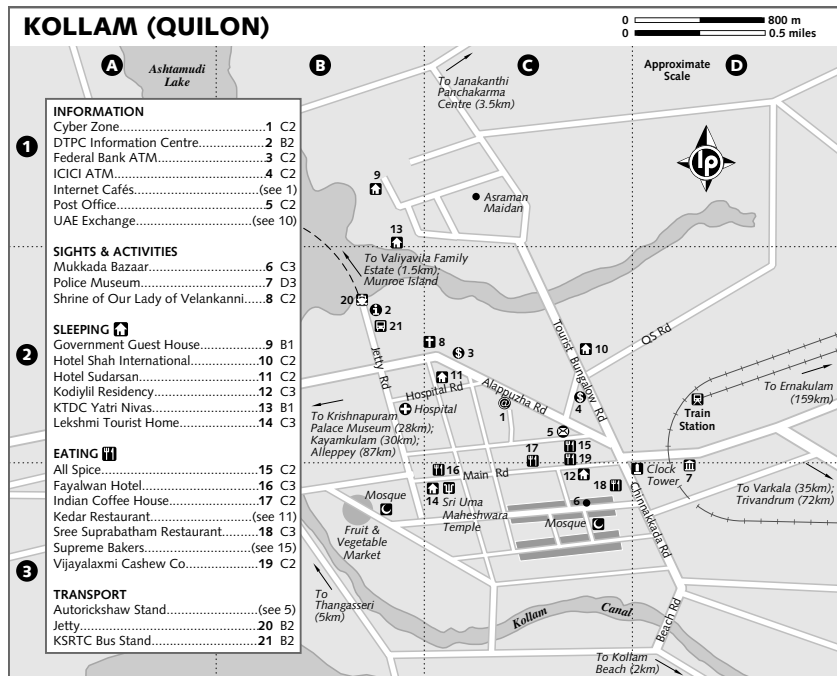
Art festival (December/January) every two years.

Activities

Janakanthi Panchakarma Centre (☎ 2763014; Vaidyasala Nagar, Asraman North; s/d Rs 400/500, with AC Rs 500/750) is a lakeside Ayurvedic resort, 5km from Kollam, popular for its seven- to 21-day treatment packages (seven-day packages start from around Rs 15,000). You can also just visit for a rejuvenation massage and herbal steam bath (Rs 500). A return boat trip from the jetty in Kollam should cost around Rs 300.

Tours

Canoe-boat tours (per person Rs 300; ☎ 9am & 2pm) through the canals of Munroe Island and across Ashtamudi Lake are organised by the DTPC. On these excellent excursions (with knowledgeable guides) you can observe daily life in this isolated village area, and see *todduvallam* (rice barge) construction, toddy (palm beer) tapping, coir-making (coconut fibre), prawn and fish farming, and do some bird-watching and perhaps a quick spice-garden tour.



Sleeping

BUDGET

The DTPC office keeps a list of **homestays** (d Rs 200-500) in and around Kollam.

Lekshmi Tourist Home (☎ 2741067; Main Rd; s/d Rs 130/200) This primitive pilgrims' lodge may have stained walls and musty rooms, but at least the sheets are clean and there's plenty of light.

Government Guest House (☎ 2743620; d without/with AC Rs 220/240; 🚻) Wafting in the remnants of faded grandeur, this Raj relic (3km north of the centre on Ashtamudi Lake) has immense, crumbling rooms with high ceilings and wooden floors. They're a bargain but isolated.

Kodiylil Residency (☎ 9847913832; Main Rd; s/d Rs 300/400, s/d with AC Rs 500/800; 🚻) This new hotel brings a desperately needed touch of class to the budget category. Bright red walls are lit by mood lighting, rooms come in shades of lime, and have stylishly modern furniture and TVs. Shame about the complete lack of windows.

MIDRANGE

KTDC Yatri Nivas (☎ 2745538; s Rs 275-330, d Rs 330-500) Though the rooms are run-down and slightly dysfunctional, they're sanitary and all have balconies overlooking the backwaters. A fun taxi-boat ride across the lake is Rs 35.

Hotel Sudarsan (☎ 2744322; Alappuzha Rd; www.hotelsudarsan.com; s Rs 450, s/d with AC from Rs 750/850; 🚻) Welcoming but overpriced, all the non-AC rooms in the front wing are spacious but very noisy. The executive rooms at the back (s/d Rs 1400/1650) are smaller and quieter.

Hotel Shah International (☎ 2742362; Tourist Bungalow Rd; r Rs 400-450, d with AC Rs 800-1300; 🚻) With a once funky, but now dated, mirrored-ceiling approach to design, this is a slightly shabby and institutional hotel. The big, bright executive rooms (Rs 1300) with AC and bathtub are OK value.

Valiyavila Family Estate (☎ 9847132449; www.kollamlakeviewresort.com; Panamukkom; s/d Rs 1300/1500, deluxe with AC Rs 2300/2500; 🚻) The pick of Kovalam's sleeping bunch, this estate crowns a breezy peninsula surrounded by leisurely backwaters on three sides. The enormous rooms have Jacuzzis and lots of windows to enjoy the views, the morning breeze and the extraordinary sight of pert bosoms (belonging to their misshapen sculpture – the 'Goddess of Light'). Call ahead for a boat pick-up or catch one of the nine daily public ferries from Kovalam (Rs 3).

Eating

Fayalwan Hotel (Main Rd; meals Rs 10-40) This is a real Indian working-man's diner, packed to the rafters come lunchtime. There are concrete booths and long benches for sitting and tucking in – try its mutton biryani (Rs 40).

Sree Suprabatham Restaurant (Chinnakkada Rd; meals Rs 20-30) This veg restaurant is popular with local families and there's a remarkable spread of breakfast dishes, especially dosas (from Rs 15).

All Spice (Musaliar Bldgs; mains Rs 30-110; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Desperate for a Western fast-food fix? Burgers (Rs 29 to 55), pizza (Rs 50 to 90), hot dogs (Rs 35) and excellent tandoori items can be followed up with ice-cream desserts – all served in a disconcertingly shiny cafeteria-style atmosphere.

Kedar Restaurant (Alappuzha Rd; mains Rs 35-130) The restaurant at Hotel Sudarsan does good Indian food; the tangy fish curry (Rs 60) is the pick of the bunch.

Also recommended:

Supreme Bakers (Musaliar Bldgs; 🍷 9am-8pm) Selection of Indian and Western cakes and sweets.

Indian Coffee House (Main Rd) Reliable for a decent breakfast and strong coffee.

Vijayalaxmi Cashew Co (Main Rd; 🍷 9.30am-8pm) A major exporter of Kollam's famous cashews; quality nuts are around Rs 250 per 500g.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

See the boxed text, p982, for information on cruises to Alleppey. There are public ferry services across Ashtamudi Lake to Gumanandapuram (one hour) and Perumon (two hours), leaving from the jetty. Fares are around Rs 10 return.

BUS

Kollam is situated on the well-served Trivandrum–Kollam–Alleppey–Ernakulam bus route, with superfast/superexpress (sic) buses going every 10 or 20 minutes to Trivandrum (Rs 42, 1½ hours), Alleppey (Rs 52, two hours) and Kochi (Rs 84, 3½ hours). Buses depart from the KSRTC Bus Stand.

TRAIN

There are frequent trains to Ernakulam (2nd class/AC chair Rs 46/177, 3½ hours, 12 daily) and Trivandrum (Rs 31/167, 1¼ hours, nine daily), as well as four daily trains to Alleppey (Rs 33/142, 1½ hours).

Getting Around

Most autorickshaw trips should cost around Rs 20, but drivers will ask for more at night. There's a prepaid stand near Supreme Bakers.

AROUND KOLLAM

Krishnapuram Palace Museum

Two kilometres south of Kayamkulam (between Kollam and Alleppey), this restored palace (☎ 2441133; admission Rs 3; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) is a grand example of Kerala architecture. Now a museum, the two-storey palace houses paintings, antique furniture and sculptures. Its renowned 3m-high mural depicts the Gajendra Moksha, or the liberation of Gajendra, the chief of the elephants, as told in the Mahabharata. The **Bharni Utsavam Festival** is held at the nearby Chettikulangara Bhaghavathy Temple in February/March.

Buses (Rs 22) leave Kollam every few minutes for Kayamkulam. Get off at the bus stand near the temple gate, 2km before Kayamkulam.

ALAPPUZHA (ALLEPPEY)

☎ 0477 / pop 282,727

A slice of Venice in the heart of Kerala, Alleppey is a mix of shady streets set around a grid of canals spilling into the vast watery highways of the region. The most popular place to organise a foray into the backwaters, this is the base for most of the houseboat-action in Kerala (and even more houseboat agents), and home to the famous Nehru Trophy Snake Boat Race. It's worth stopping in Alleppey to soak in some tropical village life before making a beeline for the backwaters.

Orientation

The bus stand and boat jetty are close to each other; the hotels are spread far and wide. The train station is 4km southwest of the town centre. The beach is about 2km west of the city centre; it's a nice, shaded walk, but there's no shelter at the beach itself and swimming is dangerous.

Information

There are several ATMs around town.

Danys Bookshop (☎ 2237828; Hotel Royale Park; 🕒 10am-1pm & 5.30-9pm) Has a small but good-quality selection of books about India, and some English fiction.

DTPC Tourist Reception Centre (☎ 2253308; www.alappuzhatourism.com; 🕒 8.30am-6pm) Fairly helpful office.

Mailbox (☎ 2339994; Boat Jetty Rd; per hr Rs 40; 🕒 8.30am-11.30pm) Internet access.

National Cyber Park (☎ 2238688; YMCA Compound; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

Tourist Police (☎ 2251161; 🕒 24hr)

UAE Exchange (☎ 1800 4259585; cnr Cullan & Mullackal Rds; 🕒 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Tours

Any of the dozens of travel agencies in town can arrange canoe-boat tours of the backwaters; see also the boxed text, p982.

The DTPC organises motor-boat rental, with several different itineraries possible in the high season (November to March). Boats cost Rs 25 per hour for up to 10 people.

Sleeping

Look out for guesthouse and heritage home accommodation in Alleppey; it's better value and a much nicer choice than the profoundly uninspiring hotels.

There are several relaxed options to stay on the backwaters a few kilometres north of Alleppey; all arrange pick-ups and drop offs from town.

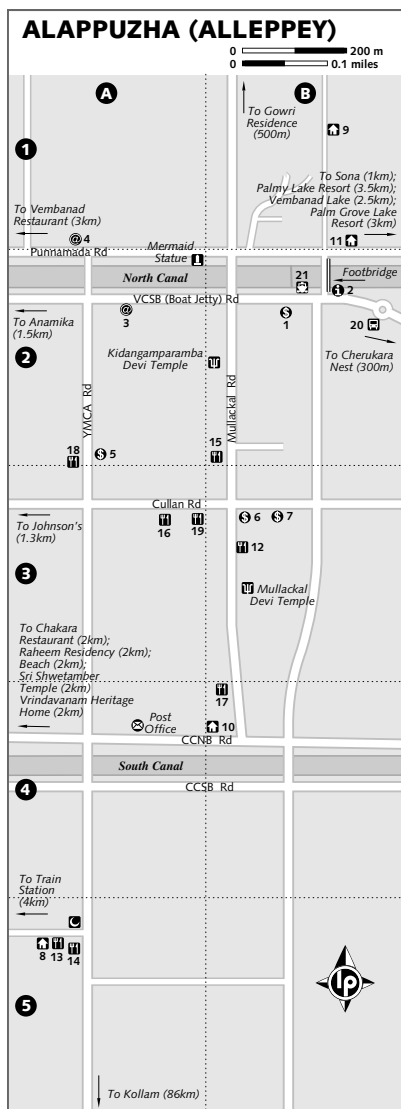
BUDGET

St George Lodgings (☎ 2251620; CCNB Rd; s/d Rs 106/190, with shared bathroom Rs 75/135) It's amazing what a fresh lick of yellow paint can do to a place – this once-grimy cheapie is now eminently sleepable. There are loads of different rooms, but all are very basic. The communal bathrooms have quite a wait.

Vrindavanam Heritage Home (☎ 2263321; Zacharia Bazaar; r Rs 250-550) Definitely the best budget deal around. The better rooms are in a beautifully preserved, 180-year-old home set around a small, luxuriant courtyard garden. The cheaper rooms are in a separate building and are inlaid with bamboo and thatch, have pretty, frilly touches and bright, hand-painted art. It's walking distance to the beach.

Palmy Residency (☎ 2235938; www.geocities.com/palmyresorts; r Rs 300-500) Run by the same super-friendly folk at Palmy Resort, this new little place is very central and has four lovely, quiet rooms of varying size – all with mosquito netting and flyscreens and free bicycles. It's just north of the footbridge.

Gowri Residence (☎ 2236371; www.gowriresidence.com; d from Rs 400, with AC Rs 900; 🕒) A friendly heritage home with a selection of spacious and



comfortable rooms with mosquito nets. The owners will pick you up and drop you off in town any time, there are free bicycles, and good food is served in gazebos in the garden or on your veranda.

Also recommended:

Hotel Raiban (☎ 2251930; s/d Rs 200/300, d with AC Rs 800; 📶) Basic, clean rooms in an institutional setting.

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Springs Inn (☎ 9847750000; Punnamada Rd; r Rs 500) Three nifty little rooms in a comely Kerala-style house.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Johnson's (☎ 2245825; www.johnsonskerala.com; d Rs 650) In a garishly painted mansion filled with funky furniture, this place has big and bright rooms with lots of greenery and enormous balconies. The owners have unusual expansion plans that involve bathtubs on the balconies, as well as cheaper rooms (Rs 250 to 400) out the back. It's not signposted.

Sona (☎ 2235211; www.sonahome.com; Shornur Canal Rd; d Rs 700) Run by a gracious family, this heritage home has cool, spacious rooms with lots of character, high rosewood ceilings, four-poster beds with nets and secluded verandas overlooking a well-kept garden. It's 1km north of town.

Palmy Lake Resort (☎ 2235938; www.geocities.com/palmyresorts; Punnamada Rd East; cottages Rs 750) With four handsome cottages, two in bamboo and two in concrete, there's loads of charm and peace draped over this small homestay, 3.5km north of Alleppey. It's set among palm groves near the backwaters and the wonderful owners provide meals on request.

Palm Grove Lake Resort (☎ 2235004; palmgrove_lr@yahoo.com; Punnamada; cottages d Rs 1200-1500) On

THE BACKWATERS

The undisputed main attraction of a trip to Kerala is travelling through the 900km network of waterways that fringe the coast and trickle far inland. Long before the advent of roads these waterways were the slippery highways of Kerala, and many villagers today still use paddle-power as transport. Trips through the backwaters cross shallow, palm-fringed lakes studded with cantilevered Chinese fishing nets, and travel along narrow, shady canals where coir (coconut fibre), copra (dried coconut meat) and cashews are loaded onto boats. Along the way are small villages with mosques, churches, temples and schools, villagers going about their daily chores and tiny settlements where people live on narrow spits of reclaimed land only a few metres wide.

Kerala Tourism (www.keralatourism.org) produces a *Backwater Map*.

Tourist Cruises

The popular cruise between Kollam and Alleppey (adult/student Rs 300/250) departs at 10.30am and arrives at 6.30pm, operating daily from August to March and every second day at other times. Many hotels in Kollam and Alleppey take bookings for one or other of these services; some offer cheaper rates but you'll end up paying the difference on board.

Generally, there are two stops: a 1pm lunch stop (be aware that you'll pay extra for every element over the standard meal!) and a brief afternoon chai stop. The crew has an ice box full of fruit, soft drinks and beer to sell. Bring sunscreen and a hat.

It's a scenic and leisurely way to get between the two towns, but as a backwater experience the cruise is limited by the fact that the boat travels along the major highways of the canal system and you won't see much of the close-up village life that makes the backwaters so magical. Some travellers have reported becoming bored with the eight-hour trip.

Another option is to take the trip halfway (Rs 150) and get off at the **Matha Amrithanandamayi Mission** (☎ 0476-2896399; www.amritapuri.org; Amrithapuri), the ashram of Matha Amrithanandamayi. One of India's very few female gurus, Amrithanandamayi is known as Amma (Mother) and is called 'The Hugging Mother' because of the *darshan* (blessing) she practises, often hugging thousands of people in marathon all-night sessions. The ashram runs official tours at 5pm each day, or you may be able to get someone to show you around when you arrive off the boat. It's a huge complex, with around 2000 people living here permanently – monks and nuns, students, Indian families and Westerners. There's food available, Ayurvedic treatments, yoga and meditation, as well as souvenirs from the cult of Amma, everything from books to postcards of her toes. Amma travels around for much of the year, so you might be out of luck if you're after a cuddle.

Visitors should dress conservatively and there is a strict code of behaviour. You can stay at the ashram for Rs 150 per day (including simple vegetarian meals) and pick up an onward or return cruise a day or two later. Alternatively, you can take a (free) ferry to the other side of the canal anytime. From here a rickshaw will take you the 10km to Karunagappally (around Rs 100) and you can take one of the frequent buses from there to Alleppey (Rs 30, 1½ hours).

The DTPC offices in Alleppey (p980) and Kollam (p977) run some sightseeing tours on tourist boats during the high season.

Houseboats

Renting a houseboat designed like a *kettuvallam* (rice barge) could be one of your most expensive experiences in India, but it's worth every darned rupee. Drifting through quiet canals lined with coconut palms, eating deliciously authentic Kerala food, meeting local villagers and sleeping on the water under a galaxy of stars – it's a world away from the clamour of India.

Houseboats cater for groups (with up to eight bunks) or couples (one or two double bedrooms). Food (and an onboard chef to cook it) is generally included in the quoted cost. The houseboats can be chartered through the DTPC in Kollam or Alleppey, or through a multitude of private operators.

This is the biggest business in Kerala and some operators are unscrupulous. The boats come in a range of qualities, from veritable rust buckets to floating palaces – try to lay eyes on the boat you'll be travelling in before agreeing on a price. Make sure that everything (eg food) has been included in your price.

Travel-agency reps will be pushing their boats as soon as you set foot in Kerala and most of the bad experiences we hear about are from people who booked their trip outside the backwater hub towns. Your choice is greater in Alleppey (350 boats and counting!), but it's also the more popular base and you're quite likely to get caught in something approaching backwater-gridlock there in the high season.

It's possible to travel by houseboat between Alleppey and Kollam, or between Alleppey and Kochi, over 24 hours but only on larger boats that operate an inboard motor. These larger boats not only cost more but aren't as environmentally friendly. Those that are propelled by punting with two long bamboo poles obviously don't allow you to cover as much distance (no more than 15km in 24 hours, usually a round trip from Alleppey), but can be a wonderfully relaxing way to travel.

Prices are hugely variable. Expect a boat for two people for 24 hours to cost anything from Rs 3500. Shop around outside the high season to negotiate a bargain; in the peak season you'll definitely pay more.

Village Tours & Canoe Boats

Village tours usually involve small groups of five to six people, a knowledgeable guide and an open canoe or covered *kettuvallam*. The tours (from Kochi, Kollam or Alleppey) are from 2½ to six hours in duration and cost around Rs 300 to 600 per person. They include visits to villages to watch coir-making, boat building, toddy (palm beer) tapping and fish farming, and on the longer trips a traditional Keralan lunch is provided. The Munroe Island trip from Kollam (see p978) is an excellent tour of this type; the tourist desk in Ernakulam also organises recommended tours (see p1006).

In Alleppey, rented canoe boats offer a nonguided laze through the canals on a small, covered canoe for up to four people (Rs 600 for four hours) – the ultimate way to spend a relaxing afternoon.

Public Ferries

If you want the local backwater transport experience, or a shorter trip, there are State Water Transport boats between Alleppey and Kottayam (Rs 12, 2½ hours, five boats daily from 7.30am to 5.30pm). The trip crosses Vembanad Lake and has a more varied landscape than the Alleppey cruise.

Environmental Issues

Environmental problems, such as pollution, land reclamation, and industrial and agricultural development, seriously threaten the backwaters and the communities that live on their banks. It's estimated that the backwaters are only at one-third of their mid-19th-century levels. Many migratory birds no longer visit the backwaters. Another very obvious problem is the unhindered spread of water hyacinth (African moss or Nile cabbage), which clogs many stretches of the canals.

Pollution from houseboat motors is becoming a real problem as their numbers swell every season. The Keralan authorities have introduced an ecofriendly accreditation system for houseboat operators. Among the categories an operator must fulfil before being issued with the 'Green Palm Certificate' are the installation of solar panels and sanitary tanks for the disposal of waste, as well as trying to minimise the use of outboard motors. Although the system is still new, ask operators whether they have the requisite certification. There's been talk of running boats on cleaner natural gas, though we've yet to see this being implemented. Seriously consider choosing a punting, rather than motorised, boat.

Punnamada Lake, close to the starting point of the Nehru Cup race, this is an upmarket option, with stylish cottages in natural materials with secluded verandas, outdoor showers and perfect patio views of the lake.

Raheem Residency (☎ 2239767; www.raheemresidency.com; Beach Rd; s/d from €117/130; 🏠 🚿) The top-end option of choice, this is a romantic, architecturally acclaimed refurbishment of an 1860s mansion. All rooms have bathtubs, dashing antique furniture and appropriate period fixtures. The common areas are airy and comfortable, and there's a thoughtfully stocked library.

Also recommended:

Cherukara Nest (☎ 2251509; lakes_lagoon@satyam.net.in; d Rs 550, with AC Rs 1200; 🏠 🚿) Gracious, century-old family home, with roomy doubles and lots of character. Breakfast included.

Anamika (☎ 242044; www.anamikahome.com; VCSB (Boat Jetty) Rd; d incl breakfast Rs 1500-2000) Elegant Syrian Christian home with four massive, breezy rooms, agreeable furniture and lamp lighting.

Eating

Hot Kitchen (Mullackal Rd; thali Rs 22-28) This place comes highly recommended for veg meals and South Indian breakfasts – it gets packed at lunchtime.

Vembanad Restaurant (AS Rd; mains Rs 30-150) At the Alleppey Prince Hotel, it's well worth making the trip out here. One of the better eating options around, you can dine pool side to live music (nightly from 6.30pm).

Kream Korner (Mullackal Rd; dishes Rs 40-80) This place has two locations with a relaxed atmosphere and is popular with Indian and foreign families. There's a multicuisine menu with tandoori choices, and the cold coffee with ice-cream (Rs 22) beats a frappuchino any day

Royal Park Hotel (YMCA Rd; meals Rs 45-210; 🏠) Excellent food is served up in this swish hotel's restaurant, and it has the same menu in the upstairs licensed bar, so you can have a Kingfisher with your tasty butter chicken masala (Rs 70).

Chakara Restaurant (☎ 2230767; Beach Rd; 3 courses €12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The restaurant at Raheem Residency is the most expensive, and best, place in town. The menu is creative and combines elements of traditional Keralan and European cuisine. Grover's Estate wine is available at Rs 990 per bottle.

Also try:

Indian Coffee House (Mullackal Rd & YMCA Rd; snacks Rs 4-12)

Hotel Aryas (Collectorate Rd; meals Rs 12-20) Has a cheap veg restaurant.

Sree Durga Bhavan Udupi Hotel (Cullan Rd; thali Rs 24) Veg food and more thalis.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Ferries run to Kottayam from the jetty on VCSB (Boat Jetty) Rd; see p983.

BUS

There are frequent services that operate along the Trivandrum–Kollam–Alleppey–Ernakulam route, with buses to Trivandrum (Rs 90, 3½ hours, every 20 minutes) also stopping at Kollam and Kochi (Rs 36, 1½ hours). Buses to Kottayam (Rs 28, 1¼ hours, every 30 minutes) are considerably faster than the ferry.

TRAIN

There are frequent trains to Ernakulam (2nd class/AC chair Rs 28/142, 1½ hours) and Trivandrum (Rs 47/180, three hours).

NEHRU TROPHY SNAKE BOAT RACE

This famous regatta on Vembanad Lake in Alleppey takes place on the second Saturday of August each year, with scores of giant, low-slung *chundan vallam* (snake boats) competing. Each boat is over 30m long with a raised, snaking prow, and is crewed by up to 100 rowers singing in unison and shaded by gleaming silk umbrellas. Watched avidly by thousands of cheering spectators, the annual event celebrates the seafaring and martial traditions of ancient Kerala with floats and performing arts.

Tickets entitle you to seats on bamboo terraces, which are erected for the races. Prices range from Rs 75 to 500 for the best seats in the Tourist Pavilion, which offers views of the finishing point and separates you from gatherings of rowdy men. Take food, drink and an umbrella.

Other less famous but no less spectacular boat races are held around the backwaters between June and September. Ask at any KTDC office for details.

AROUND ALLEPPEY

Kerala's backwaters snake in all directions from Alleppey, and while touring on a houseboat is a great experience, taking time to slow down and stay in a village can be even more rewarding.

A mere 10km from Alleppey, and run by the erudite and ever-helpful Thomas, **Greenpalm Homes** (☎ 2724497, 9495557675; greenpalms@sifi.com; Chennamkary; s/d/tr with full board Rs 1000/1500/1750) is a series of bucolic homestays that seems like a universe away. Set in a typical and ridiculously picturesque backwater village, you sleep in basic rooms in villagers' homes among the rice paddies. Your hosts double as guides to the village and its traditions, and will prepare three Kerala meals a day. It's wonderfully quiet, there are no roads in sight and you can rent bicycles (Rs 20/100 per hour/day), take canoe trips (Rs 150) or ask about cooking classes.

To get here, call ahead and catch one of the hourly ferries from Alleppey to Chennamkary (Rs 5, 1¼ hours). Please remember this is a traditional village; dress appropriately.

KOTTAYAM

☎ 0481 / pop 172,867

Sandwiched between the Western Ghats and the backwaters, Kottayam is more renowned for being Kerala's centre of the spice and rubber trade than for its aesthetic appeal. It's a good place to make a connection between these two regions, or to pop into the pretty backwater village of Kumarakom.

Kottayam is a bookish town: the first Malayalam-language printing press was established here in 1820 and it was the first district in India to achieve 100% literacy. Today it's home to the newspaper *Malayala Manorama* (with the second-largest circulation in India) and is the headquarters of DC Books, Kerala's excellent bookshop chain. A place of churches and seminaries, Kottayam was a refuge for the Orthodox church when the Portuguese began forcing Kerala Christians to switch to Catholicism in the 16th century (see the boxed text right).

The **Thirunakkara Utsavam Festival** is held in March at the Thirunakkara Shiva Temple.

Orientation & Information

The KSRTC bus stand is 1km south of the centre, the boat jetty a further 2km (at Kodimatha), while the train station is 1km north

SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN SOUTH INDIA

Tradition has it that Christianity was first brought to India in the first century, when St Thomas (one of the original apostles) found his way to the subcontinent and evangelised a family of Brahmins. With strong early ties to the Middle East, Christians in Kerala aligned themselves with the Syrian Patriarch from around the 4th century onwards.

The 16th century brought the Portuguese to Kerala, along with missionaries eager to convert locals to their Roman brand of Catholicism. Then the arrival of the Anglican British in the 18th century led to further challenges to India's unique Christianity. Today, small communities of Syrian Christians still survive in Kerala, professing a faith that dates all the way back to one adventurous apostle.

of Kottayam. There are a couple of ATMs in Kottayam.

DC Books Heritage Bookshop (☎ 2300501; Good Shepherd St; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Excellent collection of literature, philosophy and culture titles.

DTPC office (☎ 2560479; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the boat jetty.

Sify iWay (☎ 2563418; KK Rd; per hr Rs 25;

☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) Fast internet connections.

UAE Exchange (☎ 2303865; 1st fl, MC Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm Sun) For changing cash or travellers cheques.

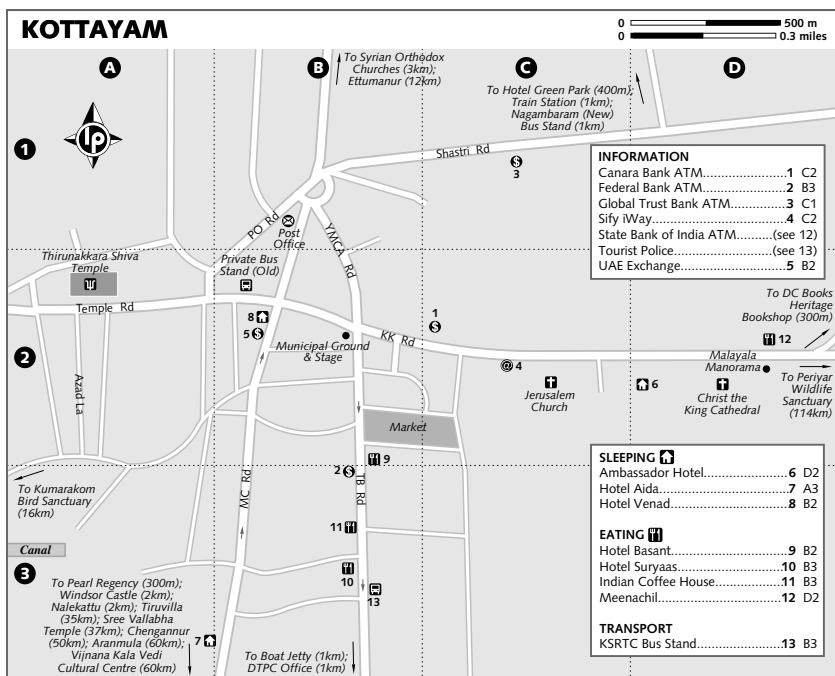
Sleeping

Accommodation for all budgets is pretty dire. Try checking for **homestays** (☎ 2560479; around Rs 500-1000) at the DTPC office, but most of these will be outside town.

Ambassador Hotel (☎ 2563293; KK Rd; s/d from Rs 200/250, d with AC Rs 600; ☎) Definitely the pick of the budget litter, the rooms are spartan but speckless, spacious and quiet. There's a bakery, an adequate restaurant and a huge painting of the *Last Supper* to greet you in the lobby.

Hotel Venad (☎ 2568012; MC Rd; s/d Rs 250/300) Venad's rooms are central, a little weathered and depressingly dark. It's do-able for a night's rest, though street-facing rooms will have to contend with the racket of the street.

Hotel Aida (☎ 2568391; MC Rd; s/d Rs 350/700, with AC Rs 500/850; ☎) Looking like a very lost ski-chalet



from the outside, the rooms inside are comfortable, but on the dark and dowdy side.

Pearl Regency (☎ 2561123; www.pearlregencyktm.com; MC Rd; s/d from Rs 1200/1400; 📶 📺) A slick new business-focused contender, this place has roomy, but boring, abodes. It's all run very efficiently, and there's an internet centre, coffee shop and restaurant on site. It's good value.

Windsor Castle (☎ 2363637; www.thewindsorcastle.net; MC Rd; s/d Rs 2500/3000, cottages Rs 5000; 📶 📺) This grandiose carbuncle of a building has the best rooms in Kottayam – minimally furnished, spacious and with bathtub – but they're still overpriced. Luxurious cottages are strewn around lake-side grounds, with Chinese fishing nets for the snaphappy.

Eating

Hotel Suryaas (TB Rd; dishes Rs 10-30; 📶) Packed at mealtimes, this popular eatery serves North and South Indian food as well as the ubiquitous thali (Rs 35).

Hotel Green Park (Nagampadon; meals Rs 30-90; 📶) The restaurant at this hotel serves up great Indian victuals, both veg and nonveg, in either its fan room or in AC comfort.

Meenachil (2nd fl, KK Rd; Rs 40-80; 📶 lunch & dinner) With a friendly family atmosphere, this tidy, modern place does good biryanis, veg and nonveg dishes, and tandoori, to the sound of cheesy muzak.

Nalekattu (MC Rd; dishes Rs 60-125; 📶 lunch & dinner) The traditional Keralan restaurant at the Windsor Castle is in an open-walled pavilion and serves delicious Keralan specialities, such as *chemeen* (mango curry, Rs 125) and *tharavu* (duck in rich coconut gravy, Rs 110).

Also try:
Indian Coffee House (TB Rd) We just can't get enough of this South Indian institution.

Hotel Basant (TB Rd; meals Rs 22) Popular lunchtime place with set meals.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Ferries run to Alleppey; see p983.

BUS

The KSRTC bus stand has buses to Trivandrum (Rs 86, four hours, every 20 minutes) and Kochi (Rs 44, two hours, every 30 minutes). There are also buses to Kumily for Peri-

yar Wildlife Sanctuary (Rs 66, four hours, every 30 minutes) and Munnar (Rs 92, 5½ hours, five daily). Private buses, which are a little faster and more comfortable, depart from the Nagambaram (New) Bus Stand for Kochi (Rs 37, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes) and Kumily (Rs 63, every hour).

TRAIN

Kottayam is well served by express trains running between Trivandrum (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 50/251/399, three hours, 10 daily) and Ernakulam (Rs 28/188/266, 1½ hours, 12 daily).

Getting Around

An autorickshaw from the jetty to the KSRTC bus stand is around Rs 30, and from the bus stand to the train station about Rs 20. Most trips around town cost Rs 15.

AROUND KOTTAYAM

Kumarakom

Kumarakom, 16km west of Kottayam and on the shore of Vembanad Lake, is an unhurried backwater town with a smattering of resplendent, top-end sleeping options. You can arrange houseboats through Kumarakom's less-crowded canals, but expect to pay considerably more than in Alleppey.

Arundhati Roy, author of the 1997 Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things*, was raised in the nearby Aymanam village.

SIGHTS

Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary (☎ 2525864; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/45; 🕒 6am-5.30pm) is on the 5-hectare site of a former rubber plantation and is the haunt of a variety of domestic and migratory birds. October to February is the time for travelling birds, such as the garganey teal, osprey, marsh harrier and steppe eagle, while May to July is the breeding season for local species, such as the Indian shag, pond herons, egrets and darters. Early morning is the best viewing time.

Buses between Kottayam's KSRTC stand and Kumarakom (Rs 8, 30 minutes, every 15 minutes) stop at the entrance to the sanctuary.

SLEEPING

Moolappura Guest House (☎ 2525980; r without/with AC Rs 600/1100; 🍷) If you are on a budget, this has small, bucolic rooms in a friendly family home 500m south of the sanctuary entrance.

Tharavadu Heritage Home (☎ 2525230; www.tharavaduheritage.com; r without/with AC Rs 1200/1800; 🍷) Tharavadu means 'large family house', an apt description. Rooms are in the perfectly restored, 1870s teak family mansion, or in individual, creekside cottages. All are well crafted, some with glistening teak-wood beams, and others with big bay windows and relaxing patios. It's 4km before the bird sanctuary

Taj Garden Retreat (☎ 2524377; retreat.kumarakom@tajhotels.com; s/d US\$150/160, cottage r US\$245, villa US\$385; 🍷 🍷) The height of secluded luxury, this excellent resort has rooms in a lovingly restored colonial house, cottages on a private lagoon in extensive grounds and luxury villas on the lake. It's right next door to the bird sanctuary, so wannabe ornithologists don't have to leave their porch.

Coconut Lagoon (☎ 2524491, reservations 0484-2668221; coconutlagoon@cghearth.com; cottages US\$190-375; 🍷 🍷) This sprawling resort has beautiful *tharawad* (ancestral home) cottages. There's a list of activities as long as your arm, including cooking classes, traditional music lessons and village walks. It's reachable by boat from the private jetty just north of the sanctuary entrance. This place might seem familiar to those who have read Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Ettumanur

The **Shiva Temple** at Ettumanur, 12km north of Kottayam, has inscriptions dating from 1542, but parts of the building may be even older than this. The temple is noted for its exceptional woodcarvings and murals similar to those at Kochi's Mattancherry Palace. The annual **festival**, involving exposition of the idol (Shiva in his fierce form) and elephant processions, is held in February/March.

Sree Vallabha Temple

Devotees make offerings at this temple, 2km from Tiruvilla, in the form of traditional, regular all-night **Kathakali** performances that are open to all. Tiruvilla, 35km south of Kottayam, is on the rail route between Ernakulam and Trivandrum.

Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Centre

This French-run **centre** (☎ 0468-2214483; www.vijnanakalavedi.org; Tarayil Mukku) at Aranmula, 10km from Chengannur, offers highly recommended courses in Indian arts with expert teachers. You can choose to study from

a range of 15 subjects, including Ayurveda, Kathakali or Kathakali make-up, *mohiniattam* and *bharatanatyam* (classical dances), Carnatic or percussive music, mural painting, Keralan cooking, languages (Malayalam, Sanskrit and Hindi) and *kalarippayat*. Classes are generally individual and are held for a minimum of three hours per day, Monday to Friday.

Fees, which include lessons, accommodation in the village and all meals, are US\$230/650 per week/month – less for longer stays. You can volunteer to teach English to children in the village schools, which will entitle you to a discount on your fees. Short stays of one to three nights are also possible (US\$32 per night), though you will need to book well ahead.

The **Aranmula Boat Race** is held here in August/September.

THE WESTERN GHATS

PERIYAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

☎ 04869

Periyar (☎ 224571; www.periyartigerreserve.org; Indian/foreigner Rs 25/300; ☎ 6am–6pm), South India's most popular wildlife sanctuary, encompasses 777 sq km, with a 26-sq-km artificial lake created by the British in 1895. It's home to bison, sambar, wild boar, langur, over 1000 elephants and at least 46 tigers. This is an established tourist spot, and can sometimes feel like Disneyland-in-the-Ghats, but the mountain scenery on the road up, the lake cruise and a jungle walk make for an enjoyable visit. Bring warm and waterproof clothing.

Orientation

Kumily, 4km from the sanctuary, is a small strip of hotels, spice shops and Kashmiri emporiums. Thekkady is the centre inside the park with the KTDC hotels and boat jetty. When people refer to the sanctuary, they tend to use Kumily, Thekkady and Periyar interchangeably.

Information

DC Books (☎ 222548; ☎ 8.30am–9.30pm) Has a small but decent-quality selection of fiction and books about India.

DTPC office (☎ 222620; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) Behind bus stand.

IR Communications (per hr Rs 40; ☎ 7am–10pm)

Spider-Net Cafe (☎ 223727; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9.30am–9.30pm)

State Bank of Travancore (☎ 10am–3.30pm Mon–Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and currency; the ATM accepts foreign cards.

Wildlife Information Centre (☎ 222028; ☎ 6am–6pm) Above the boat jetty in Thekkady.

Wildlife Interpretation Centre (☎ 7.30am–7.30pm)

This excellent centre at Spice Village (see p998) has a resident naturalist showing slides between 7.30pm and 9.30pm and answering questions about the park. Guests and diners at its restaurant can attend free of charge.

Sights & Activities

VISITING THE PARK

Two-hour **KTDC boat trips** (lower/upper deck Rs 45/100; ☎ 7am, 9.30am, 11.30am, 2pm & 4pm) around the lake are the usual way of touring the sanctuary. The boat trip itself is enjoyable enough, though any wildlife you see will be from afar. The smaller, more decrepit **Forest Department boats** (per person Rs 15; ☎ 9.30am, 11.30am, 2pm & 4pm) offer a chance to get a bit closer to the animals, and are driven by sanctuary workers who may offer some commentary. Entry to the park doesn't guarantee a place on the boat; get to the **ticket office** (☎ 6.30am–5.30pm) one hour before a scheduled trip to buy tickets (no advance reservations). The first and last departures offer the best wildlife-spotting prospects, and October to March are generally the best times to see animals.

Guided three-hour **jungle walks** (per person Rs 100; ☎ 7am, 10.30am & 2pm) cover 4km or 5km and are a better way to experience the park close up, accompanied by a trained tribal guide. Note that leeches are common after rain.

A number of more adventurous explorations of the park can be arranged by the **Ecotourism Centre** (☎ 224571; ☎ 8am–6pm). These include two-/three-day 'tiger trail' **treks** (per person Rs 3000/5000), full-day **hikes** (per person Rs 1000), three-hour **night treks** (per person Rs 500) and full-day **bamboo rafting** (per person Rs 1000) on the lake. See www.periyartigerreserve.org for more information on what's available.

A small outfit called **Tribal Heritage Tour** (per person Rs 100 ☎ 8am–4pm) does engaging 1½-hour tours through Mannakudy tribal village inside the sanctuary (you will need your park day-ticket). The walk includes a visit to the small village **museum**, which has some old tools and paintings done by villagers.

(Continued on page 997)

(Continued from page 988)

Agencies around town arrange all-day 4WD **Jungle Safaris** (per person Rs 1500; ☎ 5am-6pm), which cover over 40km of trails in jungle bordering the park. Tours include meals as well as a paddleboat trip. You can arrange **elephant rides** (per 30 min Rs 250) at **Indian Spices** (☎ 222868; Thekkady Rd).

SPICE GARDENS & PLANTATIONS

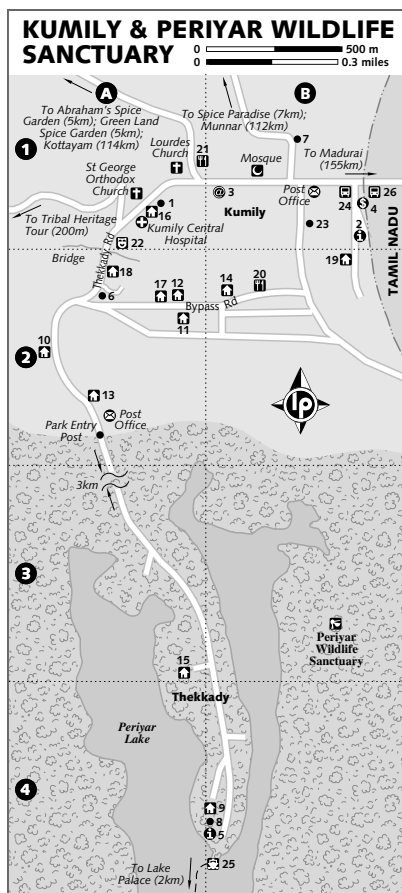
Spice tours (costing around Rs 400/600 by autorickshaw/taxi and lasting two to three hours) can be arranged anywhere and are really insightful if you get a knowledgeable guide. Spice gardens are small domestic gardens, whereas plantations are bigger commer-

cial affairs where you may also see harvesting and processing. If you want to see a tea factory in operation (worth it for the smell alone), do it here – tea-factory visits are not permitted in Munnar.

If you'd rather do it independently, you can visit a few excellent spice gardens several kilometres from Kumily: **Abraham's Spice Garden** (☎ 222919; ☎ 6.30am-7.30pm) has been going for 54 years and does one-hour tours of their 1-hectare garden for Rs 50. At **Spice Paradise** (☎ 222868; ☎ 7am-7pm) there is a 4-hectare garden interplanted with Ayurvedic herbs among the usual spices. Two-hour tours are Rs 100.

AYURVEDA

One highly recommended place for the Ayurvedic experience is **Santhigiri Ayurveda** (☎ 223979; Vandanmedu Junction), offering both massage (from Rs 500) and long-term treatments.



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Sleeping & Eating INSIDE THE SANCTUARY

The Ecotourism Centre can arrange accommodation in a **forest cottage** (d with meals Rs 2000).

The KTDC has three hotels in the park. It's a good idea to make reservations (at any KTDC office), particularly for weekends. Note that there's effectively a curfew at these places – guests are not permitted to wander the sanctuary after 6pm.

Periyar House (☎ 222026; periyar@sancharnet.in; s/d with breakfast & dinner from Rs 800/1250) This faux-brick, school camp-like complex has plain, slightly musty and definitely overpriced rooms.

Aranya Nivas (☎ 222023; aranyanivas@sancharnet.in; s/d from Rs 3100/3950; 🏠) Bright, clean abodes in an imposing, pseudo-stone building with token period touches. There are no real views, but the pool is in a lush forest setting.

Lake Palace (☎ 222023; aranyanivas@sancharnet.in; s/d ste with all meals Rs 6750/7850) The only place where you can stay in the midst of the sanctuary and view elephants over breakfast, this is an appealingly restored former game lodge with a Raj-era ambience. Transport is only by boat across the lake. Make reservations through Aranya Nivas.

KUMILY

There's a growing homestay scene in Kumily offering better bang-for-your-rupee than the town's uninspiring hotels.

Green View Homestay (☎ 211015; www.sureshgreenview.com; Bypass Rd; s Rs 150, d incl breakfast Rs 300-600) With loads of greenery, there are great large and airy doubles here, all with balconies and small sitting areas – though the singles are tiny. The garden out the back has hammocks to laze in and the hosts are very friendly.

ourpick Coffee Inn (☎ 222763; coffeinn@sancharnet.in; Thekkady Rd; huts/cottages Rs 200/250, r Rs 400-500) This is a charming, friendly place with a range of simple accommodation, from cute bamboo huts and tree houses to comfortable cottages and nicely finished rooms. Best of all, it abuts the sanctuary and it has its own secluded animal-spotting hut. Their restaurant is also top-notch.

Mickey Homestay (☎ 223196; www.mickeyhomestay.com; Bypass Rd; r Rs 250-600) In a fetching and lush family house, the five rooms here come in all shapes, sizes and configurations. All have homey touches and massive balconies with rattan furniture and hanging bamboo seats.

Ask about long-distance trekking and mountain-biking adventures (including a jungle walk all the way to Alleppey!).

Leelapankai (☎ 9349197934; Thekkady Rd; r Rs 700) Leelapankai's dainty, individual thatched-roof cottages sit up on a hill overlooking the sanctuary. They're plain on the inside, but the views of the park from the porches and restaurant are first rate.

Prime Castle (☎ 223469; Thekkady Rd; d Rs 850-1200) In a gaudy pink complex, the rooms inside are well maintained, spacious and many have chichi bathrooms. The budget annexe (Rs 100 per person) has small, dark, cheap rooms.

El Paradiso (☎ 222350; www.goelparadiso.com; Bypass Rd; r Rs 950) El Paradiso has fastidiously neat, massive rooms in a large and welcoming family-house complex. All have homely touches and balconies with hanging bamboo. Ask about Keralan cooking instruction.

Spice Village (☎ 222314; spicevillage@cghearth.com; Thekkady Rd; villa s US\$190-250, d US\$200-250, breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 300/500/500; 🏠) This place has captivating, spacious cottages in beautifully kept grounds. All the facilities (including the Raj-style bar with billiard table) are open to nonguests. The restaurant does lavish buffets, and if you come for dinner you can also attend a Keralan cooking demonstration and listen to its Wildlife Interpretation Centre talk (see p988).

Also recommended:

Rose Cottage (☎ 223146; r Rs 200-500) Next door to Green View, this is a good homestay.

Victoria House (☎ 222684; homestaythekkady@emailworld.com; Rosappukandam; r Rs 300) Huge plain rooms with hot water, TVs, and very friendly staff.

There are plenty of good cheap veg restaurants in the bazaar area.

Christie's Café (Bypass Rd; snacks Rs 30-60, meals Rs 100-120) A perennially popular haunt that continues to satisfy travellers with yummy cakes and snacks, and extremely well-prepared Western faves like pizza and pasta. Try the spinach lasagne (Rs 120).

Jungle Café (meals Rs 40-80) With views into the sanctuary jungle, this budget eatery is great for a *masala dosa* (curried vegetables in pancake) breakfast (Rs 18), pancakes (Rs 30) or traditional South Indian fare.

Coffee Inn (meals Rs 60-120) This laid-back restaurant, in a peaceful spice-garden setting, serves just a few expertly prepared Indian and Western meals. Dishes are all made fresh and take

a while – but the patient are well rewarded. Cheeky monkeys from the neighbouring sanctuary often make guest appearances.

You can also try **Hotel Lakeshore** (dishes Rs 20-60), a local favourite for veg and nonveg dishes.

Entertainment

Mudra (☎ 9447157636; admission Rs 125; 🎫 shows 4.30pm & 7pm) Kathakali shows twice a day; make-up starts 30 minutes before the show begins.

Getting There & Away

Buses originating or terminating at Periyar start and finish at Aranya Nivas, but they also stop at the Kumily bus station, at the eastern edge of town.

Eight buses daily operate between Kochi and Kumily (Rs 98, six hours). Buses leave every 30 minutes for Kottayam (Rs 66, four hours), and there are two direct buses daily to Trivandrum at 8.45am and 5pm (Rs 148, eight hours). Four morning buses and one afternoon bus go to Munnar (Rs 68, 4½ hours).

Tamil Nadu buses leave every 30 minutes to Madurai (Rs 40, four hours) from the Tamil Nadu bus stand just over the border.

Getting Around

Kumily is about 4km from Periyar Lake; you can catch the bus (almost as rare as the tigers), take an autorickshaw (Rs 40) or set off on foot; it's a pleasant, shady walk into the park. **Bicycle rental** (per hr Rs 4; 🎫 6.30am-8pm) is available from a couple of shacks near the bus stand.

MUNNAR

☎ 04865 / elev 1524m

With a *Sound-of-Music*-in-India backdrop of rolling mountain scenery, craggy peaks, manicured tea estates and crisp mountain air, Munnar really hits the spot after the sticky heat of the lowlands. Once known as the High Range of Travancore, today Munnar is the commercial centre of some of the world's highest tea-growing estates. But don't be fooled by the noisy and grubby namesake town of the region; the real attractions lie in the surrounding hills.

Information

There are ATMs near the bridge, south of the bazaar.

DTPC Tourist Information Office (☎ 231516;

🎫 8.30am-7pm) Marginally helpful.

State Bank of Travancore (☎ 230274; 🎫 10am-3.30pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) Changes travellers cheques.

Tourist Information Service (☎ 231136; 🎫 9am-6pm) Run by local legend Joseph Iype, a walking Swiss-army knife of Munnar information, this office has maps, local history, travel tips and much more.

Triveni Communications (☎ 230966; per hr Rs 40; 🎫 8am-10pm) New computers put this place a nose ahead of some sad competition.

Sights & Activities

The main reason to be in Munnar is to explore the verdant hillocks that surround it (see below for tour options). Travel agencies and autorickshaw drivers, as well as most passers-by, want to organise a day of sightseeing for you; shop around. The DTPC can organise half-day, full-day and two- to four-day **treks** around Munnar.

You can do your own 12km day-trek around the patchwork of plantations surrounding Munnar to visit the **Pothamedu Viewpoint** and the roaring **Atthukad Waterfalls**. Head south on the road towards Ernakulum, cross the bridge just after the government checkpoint, take a right and continue up the road. Take a path leading to the viewpoint just after Copper Castle Resort. Continue on to the waterfalls, from where you can take a shortcut back to the Ernakulum-Munnar Rd and either walk, or catch one of the frequent buses, back to Munnar. A rickshaw to the waterfalls or to the viewpoint and back costs Rs 150.

Tata Tea Museum (☎ 230561; adult/child Rs 50/25; 🎫 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) is, unfortunately, about as close as you'll get to a working tea factory around Munnar. It's a slightly sanitised and deserted version of the real thing, but it still shows the basic process. A collection of old bits and pieces from the colonial era, including photographs and a 1905 tea-roller, are also kept here.

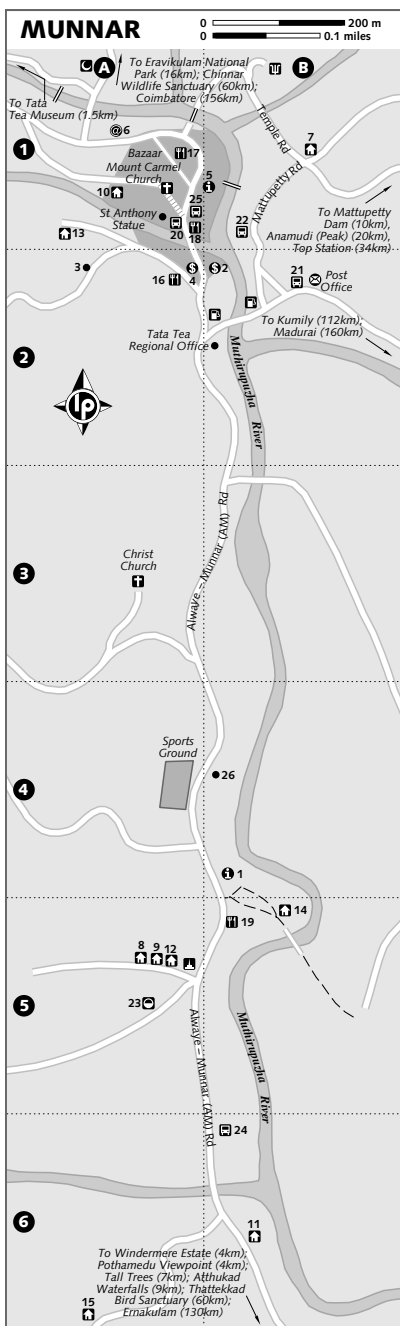
Tours

The DTPC runs a couple of fairly rushed full-day tours to points around Munnar:

Chinnar Wildlife Tour (per person Rs 300; 🎫 9am-7pm) Goes to Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary (p1001).

Sandal Valley Tour (per person Rs 300; 🎫 9am-6pm) Visits several viewpoints, waterfalls, plantations, a sandalwood forest and villages.

Tea Valley tour (per person Rs 250; 🎫 10am-6pm) Visit Echo Point, Top Station and Rajamalai (for Eravikulam National Park), among other places.

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Sleeping

There are several cheap-and-nasty hotels right in Munnar town, but these are best avoided. Prices are a bit higher than in comparable Indian towns, though there are several neat homestay and top-end options around.

Kaippallil Homestay (☎ 230203; www.kaippallil.com; r Rs 200-800) Up the hill and away from (most of) the clatter of the bazaar, Kaippallil has several unique rooms in an attractively landscaped house. There are inviting sitting areas and the rooms are eclectically but tastefully decorated, some with balconies and great views. The budget rooms share bathrooms and are a tad dark.

SMM Cottage (☎ 230159; r Rs 350-500) Right next to JJ Cottage and Green View, this brisk homestay will do if the others are full.

JJ Cottage (☎ 230104; d Rs 350-800) The mothering family at this genial homestay will go out of their way to make sure your stay is comfortable. The varied and uncomplicated rooms are very clean, bright and have TV and geyser hot water.

Green View (☎ 230940; www.greenviewmunnar.com; r Rs 500-600) Next door to JJ Cottage, this offers the same thing with less attentive staff.

Zina Cottages (☎ 230349; d incl tax Rs 600-800) Just on the outskirts of town but already immersed in lush tea plantations, these cosy rooms are an excellent deal. Stunning vistas come standard, as does the piles of information provided by gregarious owner Mr Iype from the Tourist Information Service (see p999).

Westwood Riverside Resort (☎ 230884; www.westwoodmunnar.com; AM Rd; r Rs 1800-2600) You might be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled onto a ski lodge. There's lots of polished wood around and the rooms are refreshingly pleasant for a cookie-cutter standard, midrange hotel.

Edassery Eastend (☎ 230451; www.edasserygroup.com; Mattupetty Rd; cottages Rs 1950-2300) With a Disneyland-perfect miniature garden, these blandly comfortable and spacious rooms are probably a tad overpriced.

You can also try:

Westend Cottages (☎ 230954; d Rs 250-450, with shared bathroom Rs 250) A few darkish but clean doubles in a friendly family home.

Royal Retreat (☎ 230240; www.royalretreat.co.in; r Rs 1200-1500) Comfortable rooms; OK value by Munnar's standards.

There are some excellent top-end accommodation options in plantations in the hills around Munnar, where the mountain serenity is unbeatable.

Tall Trees (☎ 230641; Pothamedu; cottages Rs 4500-5500) Spread around thick forest and far away from the clamour of the world, this back-to-nature retreat has comfy cottages with natural-wood finishes, each with balconies opening to infinite nature views. There's a kids' playground and sprawling grounds dotted with cardamom trees. It's 7km from Munnar.

Windermere Estate (☎ 230512; www.windermereunnar.com; Pothamedu; r & cottages incl breakfast US\$125-195) Windermere is a boutique-meets-country-retreat and manages to be both luxurious and intimate at the same time. There are farmhouse rooms and newer, swankier cottages with spectacular views. Book ahead.

Eating

Early morning food stalls in the bazaar serve breakfast snacks and cheap meals.

Hotel Saravan Bhavan (dishes Rs 15-50) Try this popular place for top-value veg banana-leaf meals (Rs 18).

SN Restaurant (AM Rd; meals Rs 20-80) This seems to always be full of people digging into morning

dosas (Rs 15 to 25) and other Indian dishes. The butter chicken is outstanding (Rs 60).

Rapsy Restaurant (Bazaar; dishes around Rs 25-40) This place is packed at lunchtime, with locals lining up for Rapsy's famous *paratha* or biryani (from Rs 25). It also makes a stab at international dishes like Spanish omelette (Rs 25) and Israeli *shakshuka* (scrambled eggs with tomatoes and spices Rs 30).

Silver Spoon (AM Rd; meals Rs 40-100; ☎ lunch & dinner) Beneath the Munnar Inn, this popular family eatery has some tables overlooking the river and a great Keralan fish-curry meal, with 12 all-you-can-eat dishes to savour (Rs 60).

Getting There & Away

Roads around Munnar are in poor condition and can be seriously affected by monsoon rains, so bus times may vary. The main **KSRTC bus station** (AM Rd) is south of the town, but it's best to catch buses from stands in town, where more frequent private buses also depart. See Map p1000 for bus departure locations.

There are around 10 buses a day to Ernakulam in Kochi (Rs 84, 4½ hours), and a few daily services to Kottayam (Rs 92, five hours), Kumily (Rs 68, five hours) and Trivandrum (Rs 176, nine hours). There are Tamil Nadu buses to Coimbatore (Rs 80, six hours, two daily) and Madurai (Rs 88, six hours, one daily at 2.30pm).

Getting Around

Raja Cycles (per hr Rs 8; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm) rents bicycles. **Gokulam Bike Hire** (☎ 9447237165; per day Rs 250; ☎ 7.30am-7pm) has several motorbikes for rent.

Autorickshaws ply the hills around Munnar with bone-shuddering efficiency; they charge from Rs 150 to nearby places and up to Rs 650 for a full day's sightseeing.

AROUND MUNNAR

Eravikulam National Park (Indian/foreigner Rs 15/200; ☎ 7am-6pm Sep-May), 16km from Munnar, is home to the rare, but almost tame, *Nilgiri tahr* (a type of mountain goat). From Munnar, an autorickshaw/taxi costs Rs 150/300 return; a government bus takes you the final 4km from the checkpoint (Rs 20).

Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary (☎ 7am-6pm), about 10km past Marayoor and 60km northeast of Munnar, hosts deer, leopards, elephants and the endangered grizzled giant squirrel.

Trekking (Rs 100 for three hours) and **tree house** or **hut stays** (huts Rs 500-1000) within the sanctuary are available, as well as ecotour programs like river-trekking, cultural visits, and waterfall treks (Rs 35 to Rs 100). For details contact the **Forest Information Centre** (☎ 231587; enpmunnar@sify.com; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) in Munnar. There is also accommodation in Marayoor. Buses from Munnar heading to Coimbatore can drop you off at Chinnar (Rs 28, 1½ hours).

Top Station, on Kerala's border with Tamil Nadu, has spectacular views over the Western Ghats. From Munnar, four daily buses (Rs 25, from 7.30am) make the steep 32km climb in around an hour. Taxis (Rs 800) and rickshaws (Rs 400) also make the return trip from Munnar.

Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100; ☎ 6am-6pm) is a serene 25-sq-km park, home to over 270 species, including Malabar grey hornbills, parakeets, jungle nightjar, cuckoo, grey drongo, jungle babbler, darters and rarer species, such as the Sri Lankan frogmouth and rose-billed roller. You can rent private guides (Rs 150 to 200) in the sanctuary, and there's a canteen with basic food and drinks just inside the gate. There's a **Treetop Machan** (dm Rs 900) in the sanctuary that you can stay in; contact the **assistant wildlife warden** (☎ 0485-2588302) at Kothamangalam. Otherwise, **Hornbill Inspection Bungalow** (☎ 0484-2310324; www.thehornbillcamp.com; s/d Rs 900/1800) has basic rooms outside the sanctuary, though you might be better off asking around about homestays (around Rs 600 including meals).

Thattekkad is on the Ernakulam-Munnar road. Take a direct bus from Ernakulam to Kothamangalam, from where a Thattekkad bus travels the final 12km (Rs 6, 25 minutes).

PARAMBIKULAM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Resting in a deep valley around the Parambikulam, Thunakadavu and Peruvuripallam Dams, **Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/100; ☎ 7am-6pm) extends for 285 sq km. It's home to elephants, bison, gaur, sloth bears, wild boars, sambar, chital, crocodiles, tigers, panthers and some of the largest teak trees in Asia. There's also an elephant camp at Kozhikamthi and you can go boating on the reservoir. The sanctuary is best avoided during monsoon (June to August) and it sometimes closes in March and April.

For entry to the sanctuary, permission is required from the **divisional forests officer** (☎ 04253-244500) at Thunakadavu. Three-hour jeep tours (Rs 750) are available and short treks can also be organised from here.

There are Forest Rest Houses at Thunakadavu, Thellikkal and Anappady, and a **tree-top hut** (d Rs 1000) at Thunakadavu; book through the divisional forests officer.

The best access to the sanctuary is by bus from Pollachi (40km from Coimbatore and 49km from Palakkad) in Tamil Nadu. There are at least two buses in either direction between Pollachi and Parambikulam via Anamalai daily (Rs 15, 1½ hours).

CENTRAL KERALA

KOCHI (COCHIN)

☎ 0484 / pop 1.36 million

If you listen closely, you can hear the collective sigh breathed by travellers upon setting foot in laid-back Fort Cochin. Kochi has been luring wanderers and traders for over 600 years and remains a living homage to its varied colonial past: giant fishing nets influenced by Chinese merchants, a 16th-century synagogue, ancient mosques, Portuguese houses built half a millennia ago and the crumbling residuum of the British Raj. The result is an unlikely blend of medieval Portugal, Holland and an English country village grafted on to the tropical Malabar Coast. It's a delightful place to spend some time, soak in the history, peruse art galleries and nap in some of the finest heritage accommodation in India.

Mainland Ernakulam is the hectic transport hub and cosmopolitan heart of Kerala, where neon lights and upmarket chainstores rule the roost. The historical towns of Fort Cochin and Mattancherry, however, are wonderfully serene – thick with the smell of the past and with more goats than rickshaws patrolling the streets.

Orientation

Kochi is made up of a gaggle of islands and peninsulas, including mainland Ernakulam; the islands of Willingdon, Bolgatty and Gundu in the harbour; Fort Cochin and Mattancherry on the southern peninsula; and Vypeen and Vallarpadam Islands, north of Fort Cochin. All are linked by ferry, with bridges connecting Ernakulam to Willingdon Island and the

Fort Cochin/Mattancherry peninsula; the new Goshree bridge links Ernakulam with Bolgatty, Vallarpadam and Vypeen Islands. The main train station, the bus stand and KTDC Tourist Reception Centre are in Ernakulam, while Fort Cochin and Mattancherry have all the historical sites and most of the better-value accommodation.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Current Books (Map p1008; ☎ 3231590; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) A branch of DC Books and of the same quality.

DC Books (Map p1008; ☎ 2391295; Banerji Rd, Ernakulam; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 3-8pm Sun) A typically great English-language selection.

Idiom Bookshop Fort Cochin (Map p1004; ☎ 2217075; Bastion St; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun); Mattancherry (Map p1004; opp boat jetty; 🕒 10am-6pm) Top range of good-quality new and used books.

INTERNET ACCESS

Café de Net (Map p1004; Bastion St, Fort Cochin; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 9am-10.30pm) Comfortable, fast, drinks served.

Net Park (Map p1008; Convent Rd, Ernakulam; per hr Rs 15; 🕒 9am-9pm)

Open Door Internet Café (Map p1008; Carrier Station Rd, Ernakulam; per hr Rs 20; 🕒 7.30-12.30am)

Sify iWay (Map p1004; ☎ 2215438; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 8.30am-10.30pm) Fast computers and AC comfort, at the back of a Shop-n-Save.

MONEY

There are scores of ATMs along MG Rd in Ernakulam, and a few in Fort Cochin.

Thomas Cook (Map p1003; ☎ 2374205; MG Rd; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

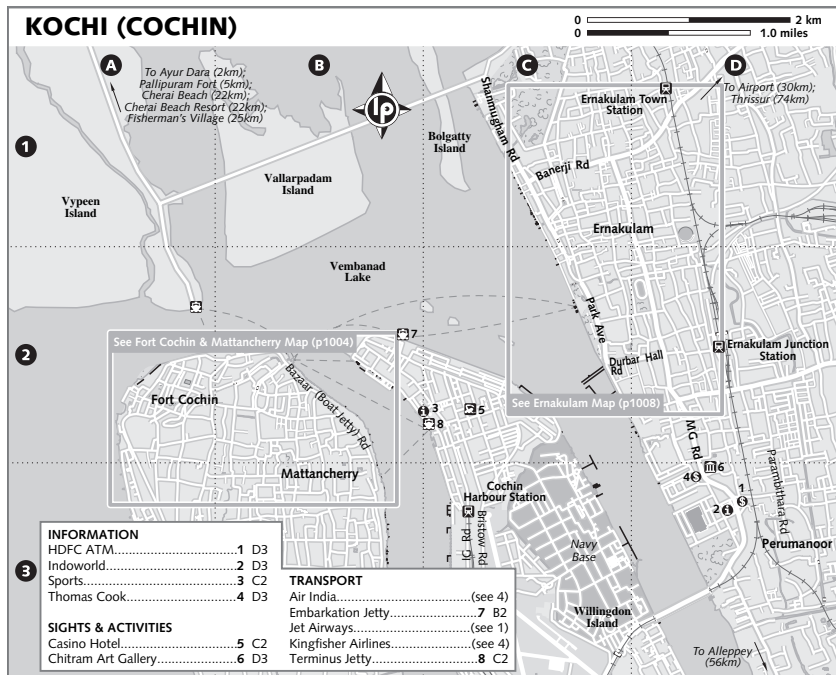
UAE Exchange (🕒 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun); Ernakulam (Map p1008; ☎ 2383317; Shanmugh Rd); Fort Cochin (Map p1004; ☎ 2812530; KB Jacob Rd)

POST

College post office (Map p1008; ☎ 2369302; Convent Rd, Ernakulam; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 9pm Sat)

Ernakulam post office branches Hospital Rd (Map p1008; ☎ 2355467; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun); MG Rd (Map p1008); Broadway (Map p1008)

Main post office (Map p1004; Post Office Rd, Fort Cochin; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat)



FORT COCHIN & MATTANCHERRY



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Indoworld.....	(see 29)	SLEEPING ☹		
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Sify iWay.....	(see 29)	Ballard Bungalow.....	25 C1	
South India Bank ATM.....	7 B2	Brunton Boatyard.....	26 C1	
State Bank of India ATM.....	8 B1	Caza Maria.....	27 F4	
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TOURIST INFORMATION

There's a tourist information counter at the airport. Many places distribute a brochure that includes a passable map and walking tour entitled 'Historical Places in Fort Cochin'.

Government of India Tourist Office (Map p1004;

☎ 2668352; indtourismkochi@sify.com; Willingdon Island; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) A huge range of brochures and maps of India.

KTDC Tourist Reception Centre (Map p1008;

☎ 2353234; Shanmugham Rd, Ernakulam; ☎ 8am-7pm) Organises tours.

Tourist Desk Information Counter Ernakulam

(Map p1008; ☎ 2371761; touristdesk@satyam.net.in;

☎ 8.30am-6pm); Fort Cochin (Map p1004) A private agency at the main ferry jetty in Ernakulam that is very knowledgeable about Kochi and beyond.

Tourist police Ernakulam (Map p1008; ☎ 2353234); Fort Cochin (Map p1004; ☎ 2215055)

Sights

FORT COCHIN

The tip of Fort Cochin is strung with the unofficial emblem of Kerala's backwaters: cantilevered Chinese fishing nets (Map p1004). A legacy of traders from the court of Kubla Khan in around the 1400s, these enormous, spider-like contraptions require at least four men to operate the counterweights – they're mainly used at high tide. Unfortunately, modern fishing techniques are making the nets less and less profitable.

Said to be India's oldest European-built church, **St Francis Church** (Map p1004) was constructed in 1503 by Portuguese Franciscan friars. The church's original wooden structure was rebuilt in stone around the mid-16th century. Vasco da Gama, who died in Cochin in 1524, was buried on this spot for 14 years before his remains were taken to Lisbon; you can still visit his tombstone in the church.

The **Indo-Portuguese Museum** (Map p1004; ☎ 215400; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/25; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), in the garden of the Bishop's House, preserves the heritage of one of India's earliest Catholic communities, including vestments, silver processional crosses and altarpieces from the Cochin diocese. The basement contains remnants of the Portuguese Fort Immanuel.

The **Dutch Cemetery** (Map p1004), consecrated in 1724, contains the worn and dilapidated graves of Dutch traders and soldiers; ask at St Francis Church if you want to have a look around.

The imposing Catholic **Santa Cruz Basilica** (Map p1004) was originally built on this site in 1506, though the current building dates to 1902. Inside you'll find artefacts from the different eras in Cochin and a striking, pastel-coloured interior.

MATTANCHERRY PALACE

Built by the Portuguese in 1555, **Mattancherry Palace** (Dutch Palace; Map p1004; ☎ 2226085; Bazaar Rd;

admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu) was presented to the raja of Cochin, Veera Kerala Varma (1537-61), as a gesture of goodwill (and probably as a means of securing trading privileges). The Dutch renovated the palace in 1663, hence its alternative name, the Dutch Palace.

The star attractions here are the astonishingly preserved Hindu **murals**, depicting scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranic legends in intricate detail. The central hall on the 1st floor, once a coronation hall, is now a portrait gallery of maharajas from 1864. There's an impressive collection of palanquins (hand-carried carriages), bejewelled outfits and splendidly carved ceilings in every room. The ladies' bedroom downstairs features a cheerful Krishna using his six hands and two feet to engage in foreplay with eight happy milkmaids.

Photography is prohibited.

PARDESI SYNAGOGUE & JEW TOWN

Originally built in 1568, the **synagogue** (Map p1004; admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Sun-Fri, closed Jewish holidays) was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1662 and rebuilt two years later when the Dutch took Kochi. It features an ornate gold pulpit and hand-painted, willow-pattern floor tiles from China. It's magnificently illuminated by chandeliers and coloured-glass lamps. The graceful clock tower was built in 1760. There is an upstairs balcony for women who worshipped separately according to Orthodox rites.

The synagogue is smack bang in the middle of **Jew Town**, a bustling port area and centre of the Kochi spice trade. Scores of small firms huddle together in old, dilapidated buildings and the air is filled with the biting aromas of ginger, cardamom, cumin, turmeric and cloves. These days, the lanes right around the Dutch Palace and the synagogue are filled with antique and tourist curio shops rather than pungent spices. Look out for the Jewish names on some of the buildings.

ART GALLERIES

Kochi is a leader in encouraging contemporary local artists.

Chitram Art Gallery (Map p1003; ☎ 2374012; MG Rd, Ernakulam; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) Has a few excellent pieces by both well-known and emerging Indian artists.

Draavidia Art & Performance Gallery (Map p1004; ☎ 3296812; Bazaar Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm) Shows off art by Keralan artists in an airy upstairs gallery. It also holds classical music concerts for Rs 100 from November to March at 6pm.

Kashi Art Gallery (Map p1004; ☎ 215769; Bazaar Rd, Mattancherry; ☎ 10am-6pm) Changing exhibitions, local artists, often experimental.

Lila Studio (Map p1004; www.anandagaya.com; Bazaar Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) Mostly showing works by co-director, painter and sculptor Gayatri Gamuz.

Activities

SWIMMING

Nonguests can swim in the garden pool of **Casino Hotel** (Map p1003; Wellington Island; per person Rs 250). For a dip in the ocean, you can make a day trip to the attractive **Cherai beach** on Vypeen Island (see p1014).

AYURVEDA

Ayur Dara (☎ 2502362; www.ayudara.de; Murikkumpadam, Vypeen Island; 1-/7-day treatment incl lunch Rs 1000/7000; ☎ 9am-5pm) Run by a world-renowned Ayurvedic practitioner, it's 4km from the Vypeen Island ferry (autorickshaw Rs 30). Appointment necessary.

Cochin Ayurvedic Centre (Map p1004; ☎ 2217103; fort_hs@yahoo.com; Santa Cruz School Rd, Fort Cochin; massage treatment from Rs 500; ☎ 9am-7pm) Recommended Ayurvedic massage and treatment.

Kerala Ayurveda Chikitsa Kendram (Map p1008; ☎ 2376916; Kannanthodathu Lane, Ernakulam; rejuvenation massage Rs 500, steam bath Rs 200; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) Full range of treatments available.

Courses

Mrs Leelu Roy runs a highly recommended class called **Cook & Eat** (Map p1004; ☎ 2215377; simonroy@hotmail.com; Quiros St; class Rs 400; ☎ 11am & 6pm) in a great big family kitchen. Several homestays also run cooking demonstrations for guests – ask around.

The **Kerala Kathakali Centre** (see p1012) has lessons in classical Kathakali dance, music and make-up (from Rs 350 per hour).

Tours

The private Tourist Desk Information Counter runs a full-day backwater tour (Rs 550) on a houseboat through the wider canals and lagoons, and a canoe through the small canals and villages. Lunch and hotel pick-up are provided. See the boxed text, p983, for more information.

The KTDC runs half-day backwater tours (Rs 350) at 8.30am and 2.30pm, and tourist boat tours around Fort Cochin (Rs 100) at the same times. It also has full-day backwater trips (Rs 650) at 8.30am, where you stop to see local

weaving factories, spice gardens and most importantly toddy (palm beer) tapping!

Festivals & Events

The eight-day **Ernakulathappan Utsavam festival** culminates in a procession of 15 decorated elephants, ecstatic music and fireworks.

Sleeping

Fort Cochin is a great place to escape the noise and chaos of the mainland – it's tranquil and romantic, with superior accommodation choices. Budget-priced rooms, however, are becoming rarer each season. Ernakulam is buzzing, and more convenient for onward travel, but accommodation is uninspiring. Book well ahead during December and January.

BUDGET

Fort Cochin

Oy's Homestay (Map p1004; ☎ 2215798; oyshomestay@yahoo.com; Burgher St; s Rs 150-400, d Rs 250-500) Oy's has a warren of eclectic and funky rooms. They run the whole gamut from big, bright and cheery to small, dark and dreary.

Princess Inn (Map p1004; ☎ 2217073; princessinfrtkochi@gmail.com; Princess St; s Rs 250, d Rs 350-550) A shining example of what a fresh lick of paint can do: sprucing up what would otherwise be dull, small rooms with cheery bright colours, comfy communal spaces and spotless bathrooms. Great value.

Spice Holidays Homestay (Map p1004; ☎ 2216650; spiceholidays@yahoo.com; Burgher St; s/d from Rs 350/500) The friendly owners here more than make up for the plain rooms, which lack window real estate. The courtyard and welcoming sitting area is a plus.

Vasco Homestay (Map p1004; ☎ 2216267; vascoinformations@yahoo.co.uk; Rose St; d Rs 400-700) The long-timer has just two subdivided rooms in an elegant Portuguese mansion, thought to be the house where Vasco da Gama died. Its corner room is sensational value: it's enormous, has poster beds with mosquito netting, a few simple decorations and bay windows looking onto St Francis church.

Green Woods Bethlehem (Map p1004; ☎ 3247791; greenwoodsbethlehem1@vsnl.net; opp ESI Hospital; r Rs 400-800, with AC Rs 1000; ☎) This excellent option is in a residential area enclosed in its own, thick jungle of plants and palms, 1½km south of Fort Cochin. There are a few humble, but extremely cosy, rooms, top-floor ones with bird's eye-to-eye views of the treetops. The

family (who look ready to adopt everyone who walks through the door) often cook enough dinner for everyone to join in. Breakfast on their inviting rooftop is included and they often hold cooking classes/demonstrations.

You can also try:

Elite Hotel (Map p1004; ☎ 2215733; elitejoy@yahoo.com; Princess St; s Rs 350, d Rs 400-800) An old-school backpacker favourite, the plain rooms are barely OK value these days.

Vintage Inn (Map p1004; ☎ 2215064; www.vintage-resorts.in; Residale Branch Rd; s Rs 300-500, d Rs 600-800, d with AC Rs 1200; ☎) Away from the action, with clean, bright and roomy but unexciting digs.

Ernakulam

Piazza Residency (Map p1008; ☎ 2376508; Kalathiparambil Rd; s Rs 170-250, d Rs 240-370) Rooms here are carpeted and a little tattered, but come in a variety of sizes and have tolerable wooden furniture.

Sapphire Tourist Home (Map p1008; ☎ 2381238; Cannon Shed Rd; d Rs 275-325) Close to the main boat jetty, this place has cheerful, bright rooms – not bad value at this price.

Maple Tourist Home (Map p1008; ☎ 2355156; Cannon Shed Rd; d Rs 285-450, with AC Rs 680; ☎) This place has solid-value rooms right near the boat stations. Some are still fresh and sparkling clean from a refurbishment, and all come with TV.

Bijus Tourist Home (Map p1008; ☎ 2361661; www.bijus-touristhome.com; Market Rd; s/d from Rs 325/420, d with AC Rs 800; ☎) A friendly, ever-popular choice, handy for the main jetty. Rooms are smart, simple and comfy, and the place is efficiently run

MIDRANGE

Fort Cochin

Walton's Homestay (Map p1004; ☎ 2215309; cewalton@rediffmail.com; Princess St; r Rs 800-1000) You'll be in good care with the affable Waltons as your hosts. They have big and light rooms, all white with blue trim, a lush garden out the back and a second-hand bookshop downstairs. They also have a big garden cottage with AC (Rs 1500 to 1800).

Ann's Residency (Map p1004; ☎ 2218024; www.annsresidency.com; Post Office Rd; r Rs 1000-1850, with AC Rs 1850-2300; ☎) A friendly homestay that has 11 varied and bright rooms, all with poster beds and mosquito nets. There's an open-air restaurant and some rooms have balcony views looking onto the school classes next door.

Spencer Home (Map p1004; ☎ 2215049; spencerhomeestyfc@rediffmail.com; Parade Ground Rd; d Rs 1200) This

ERNAKULAM

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles



INFORMATION	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Indian Coffee House.....29 B4
College Post Office.....1 C4	Kerala Ayurveda Chikitsa	Indian Coffee House.....30 C5
Current Books.....2 B4	Kendram.....(see 34)	Pizza Hut.....31 D5
DC Books.....3 B2	SLEEPING	Spencer's Daily.....32 C2
Federal Bank ATM.....4 A3	Bijus Tourist Home.....17 B4	Spices Food Joint.....33 C4
Federal Bank ATM.....(see 7)	Hotel Aiswarya.....18 C6	ENTERTAINMENT
HDFC Bank ATM.....5 C2	Hotel Excellency.....19 D6	Art Kerala.....34 D6
Idbi Bank ATM.....6 C3	Maple Tourist Home.....20 B4	See India Foundation.....35 D6
ING Bank ATM.....7 C4	Paulson Park Hotel.....21 D5	Shenoy Cinema.....36 A3
KTDC Tourist Reception Centre..8 B4	Piazza Residency.....22 D5	SHOPPING
Net Park.....9 C4	Sapphire Tourist Home.....23 B4	Kairali.....37 C6
Open Door Internet Café.....10 D5	Yuvarani Residency.....24 C5	TRANSPORT
Penta Menaka Building.....11 A3	EATING	Bus to Fort Cochin.....38 D6
Post Office.....12 B4	Chinese Garden.....25 D6	High Court Jetty.....39 A2
Post Office.....13 C5	City Park Restaurant.....(see 23)	India Airlines.....40 C6
Post Office.....14 C6	Coffee Bean.....26 B4	KSRTC Bus Stand.....41 D4
State Bank of India ATM.....15 B4	Frys Village	Main Jetty.....42 B5
Tourist Desk Information	Restaurant.....27 C2	Private Ferry.....43 A2
Counter.....16 B5	Indian Coffee House.....28 C3	
Tourist Police.....(see 8)		
UAE Exchange.....(see 4)		

handsomely restored heritage home has snug rooms around a quiet garden courtyard – complete with huge Chinese fishing net. Check out the amazingly intricate gold antique lock on one of the doors.

Delight Home Stay (Map p1004; ☎ 2217658; www.delightfulhomestay.com; Post Office Rd; r Rs 1200-1500, with AC Rs 2500; 📶) Delightful it is. There are many uniquely styled rooms, all beautifully remodelled and immediately alluring. There's frilly white woodwork all around, a trim garden and an imposing sitting room covered in wall-to-wall polished teak. Keralan cooking classes are held here.

Raintree Lodge (Map p1004; ☎ 3251498; www.fortcochin.com; Peter Celli St; r Rs 1800; 📶) The intimate and comfortable rooms have an agreeable blend of modern and period odds and ends. Try to get an upstairs room with a balcony looking onto the quiet street.

Also recommended:

Kapithan Inn (Map p1004; ☎ 2226560; www.kapithaninn.com; s/d from Rs 600/750, cottages Rs 1800-3000; 📶) Quiet and pleasant, with bright, restful rooms.

Ballard Bungalow (Map p1004; ☎ 2215854; www.cochinballard.com; River Rd; d Rs 1200, with AC Rs 2200; 📶) A gorgeous colonial building with airy, spacious rooms. Price includes breakfast.

Ernakulam

Respectable midrange options in Ernakulam are few and far between.

Hotel Aiswarya (Map p1008; ☎ 2364454; Warriam Rd; s/d Rs 400/600, d with AC Rs 900; 📶) Top marks for its central location and a respectable score for its clean, bright rooms. This is a fair midrange choice.

Paulson Park Hotel (Map p1008; ☎ 2378240; www.paulsonparkhotel.com; Carrier Station Rd; s/d from Rs 500/800, with AC Rs 900/1200; 📶) Right near the station, this spick-and-pan, quiet place boasts a fantasy-inspired indoor garden (was that a unicorn?). The cheaper rooms are minimalist, but the pricier rooms have just enough decoration to make them feel welcoming.

Hotel Excellency (Map p1008; ☎ 2378251; www.hotelexcellency.com; Nettipadam Rd; s/d from Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 900/1000; 📶) It feels a little like a hospital but rooms are neat and very tidy. Look at a few rooms; some are bigger than others.

Yuvarani Residency (Map p1008; ☎ 2377040; www.yuvaraniresidency.com; MG Rd; s/d from Rs 850/1000, with AC Rs 1250/1600; 📶) Even though all that glitters is not gold here, the rooms are perfectly comfortable and finished with all the stylish dark-wood fixtures your heart might desire. It's set back from MG Rd enough to shield the noise, making it the best midrange choice in town.

Mattancherry & Jew Town

Caza Maria (Map p1004; ☎ 2225678; cazamaria@rediffmail.com; Jew Town Rd; r with breakfast Rs 1600 & 1900) Right in the heart of Jew Town, this place has just two magnificently decorated, gigantic rooms overlooking the bazaar. Fit for a maharaja, it definitely has idiosyncratic style.

TOP END

Fort Cochin

Malabar House (Map p1004; ☎ 2216666; www.malabarhouse.com; Parade Ground Rd; r €175, ste €250-300, incl breakfast; 📶) If you have money to burn, let this be your pyre. What may just be the best boutique hotel in India, Malabar flaunts its

uber-hip blend of modern colours and period fittings like it's not even trying. The suites are huge and lavishly appointed, although the standard rooms could use more space.

Brunton Boatyard (Map p1004; ☎ 2215461; bruntonboatyard@cghearth.com; River Rd; r US\$275, ste US\$385; 🚶 🚗) This imposing hotel faithfully reproduces 16th- and 17th-century Dutch and Portuguese architecture in a grand 26-room complex. All of the smallish rooms look out over the harbour, and have bathtub and balconies with a refreshing sea breeze that's better than AC. There are two restaurants and a bar; breakfast is included.

Around Cochin

our pick **Olavipe Homestay** (☎ 0478-2522255; www.olavipe.com; Olavipe; s/d incl meals Rs 5000/6500) This gorgeous 1890s traditional Syrian-Christian home is on a 16-hectare farm surrounded by backwaters, 28km south of Cochin. A restored mansion of rosewood and glistening teak, it has several large and breezy rooms – all wonderfully finished with original period décor (only the ceiling fans are new). There are lots of shady awnings and sitting areas, a fascinating archive with six generations of family history, and the gracious owners will make you feel like a welcome friend rather than a guest. You can visit nearby backwater villages from here, use their paddle boat, or help out with the working shrimp farm or plant pollination. A taxi to/from Fort Cochin is Rs 600 to 700.

Eating & Drinking

Covert beer consumption is *de rigueur* at most of the Fort Cochin restaurants, and more expensive in the licensed ones (Rs 80 to 165).

FORT COCHIN

In some places you can blow a night's accommodation on a single dish, but with some genuinely interesting food on offer you'll get the urge to splurge.

Teapot (Map p1004; Peter Celli St; snacks Rs 30-50, meals Rs 150) This stylish haunt is the perfect venue for high tea, with quality teas, sandwiches and full meals served in chic minimalist, airy rooms. Witty accents include antique teapots, old tea chests for tables and a gnarled, tea tree-based glass table. The death by chocolate (Rs 50) is truly coco homicide, trust us.

Solar Café (Map p1004; Bazaar Rd; meals Rs 30-75; ☎ 10am-6pm) This arty and funky café at Draavidia Gallery (p1006) serves up breakfast and

lunch in a brightly coloured and friendly setting. It has some upstairs veranda seats overlooking the hubbub of the street below.

Talk of the Town (Map p1004; cnr KB Jacobs Rd & Bastion St; meals Rs 30-120) Upstairs, casual and breezy, don't miss out on the cheap and expertly prepared Indian dishes whipped up here.

Kashi Art Café (Map p1004; Burgher St; breakfast/lunch Rs 70/75; ☎ 8.30am-7pm) Something of an institution, this place has a hip-but-casual vibe, along with hip-but-casual service. The coffee is as strong as it should be, and the daily Western breakfast and lunch specials are excellent. You can fill plastic water bottles for Rs 5 per litre, and a small gallery shows off local artists.

Old Courtyard (Map p1004; ☎ 2216302; Princess St; mains from Rs 160) Seafood focused, the small but thoughtful international menu is well executed – Spanish-style beef (Rs 250) and baked mussels (Rs 150) get our vote.

Malabar Junction (Map p1004; ☎ 2216666; Parade Ground Rd; mains Rs 300-1000) Set in an open-sided pavilion, this classy restaurant at Malabar House is movie-star cool. There's a seafood-based, European-style menu and Grover's Estate (quaffable, Indian) wine by the bottle (Rs 1200) or glass (Rs 250).

Also recommended:

New Ananda Bhavan (Map p1004; River Rd; dishes Rs 11-35) Herbivores: make a beeline for this basic but spotless veggie restaurant.

Salt 'n' Pepper (Map p1004; Tower Rd; dishes Rs 35-120; ☎ 24 hr) Superbly average food, but the street-side tables bustle nightly with punters having a special-teapot tipple (Rs 80).

History Restaurant (Map p1004; ☎ 2215461; River Rd; mains Rs 350-425) At the Brunton Boatyard, this restaurant has a marvellous historical menu tracing Kochi's Jewish, Syrian, Arabic and Portuguese history.

Behind the Chinese fishing nets are a couple of **fishmongers** (Map p1004; seafood per kg Rs 50-300), from whom you can buy fish (or prawns, scampi, lobster), then take your selection to a shack where they will cook it and serve it to you (about Rs 40 per kilogram of fish).

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Spices Food Joint (Map p1008; Cannon Shed Rd; dishes Rs 7-35; ☎ 5am-12pm) A family-run hole-in-the-wall restaurant captained by the gregarious Sherief. The cheap veg, chicken and meat biryanis (Rs 18 to 35), as well as fish-curry meals (Rs 15), are deservedly popular.

Frys Village Restaurant (Map p1008; Veeekshanam Rd; dishes Rs 15-70; ☎ lunch & dinner) This cafeteria-like family restaurant is the best place in town for authentic Keralan food, especially seafood, such as fish *pollichathu* and crab roast (both Rs 65).

City Park Restaurant (Cannon Shed Rd; dishes Rs 60-90) City Park has a well-prepared and varied menu (Indian, Chinese, continental). The masala tea is especially tangy (Rs 8).

Chinese Garden (Warrior Rd; dishes Rs 75-150; ☎ lunch & dinner) Good Chinese food served in a plush-red, moodily lit interior.

Other options:

Spencer's Daily (Veeekshanam Rd; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Well-stocked supermarket.

Indian Coffee House (Cannon Shed Rd) Also has branches on Jos Junction and MG Rd near Padma Junction.

Coffee Bean (Shanmugham Rd; breakfasts Rs 20-60; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) For a hip coffee hit.

Pizza Hut (Durbar Hall Rd; medium pizza Rs 90-120; ☎ lunch & dinner) For when the junk-food cravings win. Delivery is available.

MATTANCHERRY & JEW TOWN

Ramathula Hotel (Map p1004; Lobo Junction, Mattancherry; biryani Rs 22-38; ☎ lunch & dinner) This place is legendary among locals for its chicken and meat biryanis – get here early or you'll miss out. It's better known by the chef's name, Kayee.

Caza Maria (Map p1004; ☎ 2225678; Boat Jetty Rd; mains from Rs 100-200; ☎ lunch & dinner) Run by a Frenchman, this is an enchanting space with good music but slightly bland food. There's a small menu of Indian and a few French dishes (*poisson à la Provençale*, Rs 140). Service is great and the ambience delightful.

Entertainment

CINEMAS

Shenoy Cinema (Map p1008; Shanmugham Rd, Ernakulam; tickets Rs 40) Screens films in Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil and English.

KATHAKALI

There are several places in Kochi where you can view Kathakali (see the boxed text, below).

TRADITIONAL KERALAN ARTS

Kathakali

The art form of Kathakali crystallised at around the same time as Shakespeare was scribbling his plays, though elements of it stem from 2nd-century temple rituals. The Kathakali performance is the dramatised presentation of a play, usually based on the Hindu epics the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. All the great themes are covered – righteousness and evil, frailty and courage, poverty and prosperity, war and peace.

Drummers and singers accompany the actors, who tell the story through their precise movements, particularly mudras (hand gestures) and facial expressions. Traditionally, performances took place in temple grounds and went from 8pm until dawn; now shorter performances in other open-air locales, as well as indoor halls, are also popular.

Preparation for the performance is lengthy and disciplined. Paint, fantastic costumes, highly decorated headpieces and meditation transform the actors both physically and mentally into the gods, heroes and demons they are about to play.

You'll can see cut-down performances in tourist hot spots all over the state, and there are Kathakali schools in Trivandrum (see p966) and near Thrissur (see p1017) that encourage visitors. Many temple festivals across the state feature traditional all-night Kathakali shows; ask at DTPC offices.

Kalarippayat

Kalarippayat is an ancient tradition of martial training and discipline. Still taught throughout Kerala, some believe it is the forerunner of all martial arts. Its roots can be traced back to the 12th century, when skirmishes among the many feudal principalities in the region were common.

Masters of *kalarippayat*, called Gurukkal, teach their craft inside a special arena called a *kalari*. The *kalari* is part gymnasium, part school and part temple. Its construction follows traditional principles: its rectangular design is always aligned east-west and Hindu deities are represented in each corner.

Kalarippayat movements – the foundation of choreography that uses the actors' bodies and gestures as the primary tools of expression – can be traced in Kerala's performing arts, such as Kathakali and *kootiattam* (traditional Sanskrit drama), and in ritual arts such as *theyyam*.

The performances are certainly made for tourists, but they're also a great introduction to this intriguing art form. The standard programme starts with the intricate make-up application, followed by a commentary on the dance and then the performance. All places charge around Rs 125.

See India Foundation (Map p1008; ☎ 2376471; Kalathiparambil Lane, Ernakulam; 🕒 make-up 6pm, show 6.30-8pm) One of the oldest Kathakali theatres in Kerala, it has small-scale shows with an emphasis on the religious and philosophical roots of Kathakali.

Art Kerala (Map p1008; ☎ 2375238; Kannanthodath Lane, Ernakulam; 🕒 make-up 6pm, show 7-8.15pm) Started in 1977, this place stages rooftop performances and provides a printout of the night's story.

Kerala Kathakali Centre (Map p1004; ☎ 2215827; www.kathakalicentre.com; River Rd, Fort Cochin; 🕒 make-up 5pm, show 6.30-8pm) This place stages big, showy performances. It provides useful printed translations of the night's story. Classes in classical dance, music and make-up (from Rs 350 per hour) are also available.

Shopping

Broadway in Ernakulam (p1008) is good for local shopping, spice shops, clothing and a bazaar feel. Around Convent and Market Rds there's a huddle of tailors, and on and around Market Rd, between Jew and Press Club Rds, is the textiles centre. On Jew Town Rd in Matancherry (Map p1004), there's a plethora of shops selling antiques and reproductions. Many shops in Fort Cochin operate lucrative commission rackets, with rickshaw drivers getting huge kickbacks (which are added to your price) just for dropping tourists at the door.

Kairali (Map p1008; ☎ 2354507; MG Rd, Ernakulam; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) This is one of many handicraft shops around here, a government emporium with quality items at fixed prices. There's a much smaller Kairali (Map p1004; ☎ 221544; River Rd; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) in Fort Cochin.

Cinnamon (Map p1004; ☎ 2217124; Post Office Rd, Fort Cochin; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) This exquisite shop sells high-quality, individually designed Indian clothes and homewares.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Book flights through the following airlines:

Air India (Map p1003; ☎ 2351295; MG Rd; 🕒 9.30am-1pm & 1.45-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

Indian Airlines (Map p1008; ☎ 2370235; Durbar Hall Rd; 🕒 9.45am-1pm & 1.45-5pm)

Jet Airways (Map p1003; ☎ 2293231; MG Rd; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun)

Kingfisher Airlines (Map p1003; ☎ 2351144; Sreekanadath Rd; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Jet Airways has three daily services to Mumbai (US\$239), one daily to Chennai (US\$164) and Delhi (US\$442), and two daily to Bengaluru (US\$126). Indian Airlines flies daily to these cities for the same prices, and also has two flights a week to Goa (US\$172) and daily flights to Trivandrum (US\$142). Kingfisher flies to most of these destinations for nearly 70% less.

BUS

The **KSRTC bus stand** (Map p1008; ☎ 2372033; 🕒 reservations 6am-10pm) is in Ernakulam, along the railway, halfway between the train stations, near Ammankovil Rd. Many buses passing through Ernakulam originate in other cities – you may have to join the scrum when the bus pulls in. You can make reservations up to five days in advance for buses originating here. There's a separate window for reservations to Tamil Nadu. See the boxed text, below, for more information on buses from Ernakulam.

In addition, two daily buses (6am and 9pm) run up the coast through Calicut to Kannur (Cannanore), Kasaragod and onto Mangalore (Rs 304).

MAJOR BUSES FROM ERNAKULAM

The following bus services operate from the KSRTC bus stand.

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Alleppey	33	1½	every 20min
Bengaluru	304	14	6 daily
Calicut	118	5	hourly
Chennai	425	15	2 daily
Coimbatore	127	4½	9 daily
Kanyakumari	166	8	2 daily
Kollam	84	3½	every 20min
Kottayam	38	2	every 20min
Kumily (for Periyar)	73	5	6 daily
Madurai	167	9	2 daily
Thrissur	40	2	every 15min
Trivandrum	127	5	every 20min

There are a number of private bus companies that have super-deluxe, AC, video buses daily to Bengaluru, Chennai, Mangalore and Coimbatore; prices are around 75% higher than the government buses, and there are shops and stands selling tickets all over Ernakulam. The main private bus stand (the Kaloor bus stand) is north of the city.

TRAIN

Ernakulam has two train stations, Ernakulam Town and Ernakulam Junction. Reservations for both stations have to be made at the Ernakulam Junction **reservations office** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun).

There are daily trains to Trivandrum (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 60/335/470, 4½ hours, 13 daily), via either Alleppey (Rs 28/188/266, 1½ hours) or Kottayam (Rs 28/188/266, 1½ hours). There are also trains to Thrissur (Rs 30/188/266, two hours, 10 daily), Calicut (Rs 57/281/402, five hours, seven daily) and Kannur (Rs 75/361/518, seven hours, seven daily). For long-distance trains, see the boxed text, below.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Kochi International Airport (✈ 2610113) is at Nedumbassery, 30km northeast of Ernakulam. Taxis to Ernakulam cost around Rs 400, and from Fort Cochin around Rs 550.

BOAT

Ferries are the fastest form of transport between Fort Cochin and the mainland. The stop on the eastern side of Willingdon Island is called Embarkation (Map p1004); the

west one, opposite Mattancherry, is Terminus (Map p1003); and the main stop at Fort Cochin is Customs (Map p1004), with another stop at the Mattancherry Jetty near the synagogue (Map p1004). Ferry fares are all around Rs 2.50; buy tickets on board.

Ernakulam

There are services to Fort Cochin every 40 minutes (4.40am to 9.30pm) from the main jetty (Map p1008). There are six ferries directly to/from the Mattancherry Jetty (5.55am to 6.45pm). The ticket office in Ernakulam opens 10 minutes before each sailing.

Ferries run every 20 minutes to Willingdon and Vypeen Islands (6am to 10pm) – although with the new bridge to Vypeen these are often empty.

Fort Cochin

Ferries run from Customs Jetty to Ernakulam from 6.20am to 9.50pm. Ferries also run between Customs Jetty and Willingdon Island about 18 times a day from 6.40am to 9.30pm (Monday to Saturday).

Car and passenger ferries cross to Vypeen Island from Fort Cochin virtually nonstop from 6am until 10pm.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

There are no real bus services between Fort Cochin and Mattancherry Palace, but it's an enjoyable 30-minute walk through the busy warehouse area along Bazaar Rd. Autorickshaws should cost around Rs 20, but you'll need to haggle. Most autorickshaw trips around Ernakulam shouldn't cost more than Rs 25.

MAJOR TRAINS FROM ERNAKULAM

The following are major long-distance trains departing from Ernakulam Town.

Destination	Train No & Name	Fare (Rs Sleeper/3AC/2AC)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Bengaluru	6525 <i>Kanyakumari–Bangalore Exp</i>	261/705/1000	11	6.05pm
Chennai	2624 <i>Trivandrum–Chennai Mail</i>	293/771/1082	12	7.10pm
Delhi*	2625 <i>Kerala Exp</i>	589/1601//2282	48	3.50pm
Mangalore	6329 <i>Malabar Exp</i>	190/505/716	10½	11.50pm
Mumbai	1082 <i>Kanyakumari–Mumbai Exp</i>	477/1313/1878	41	12.50pm
Parasuram	6349 <i>Parasuram Exp</i>	116/395**	10	11.15am

* Departs from Ernakulam Junction

** Fare in 2nd class/AC chair

To get to Fort Cochin after ferries stop running, catch a bus in Ernakulam on MG Rd (Rs 6), south of Durbar Hall Rd. Taxis charge round-trip fares between the islands, even if you only go one way – Ernakulam Town train station to Fort Cochin should cost around Rs 150.

Vasco Tourist Information Centre (Map p1004; ☎ 2216215; vascoinformations@yahoo.co.uk; Bastion St, Fort Cochin) rents bicycles/scooters for Rs 45/200 per day.

AROUND KOCHI

Tripunithura

Hill Palace Museum (☎ 0484-2781113; admission Rs 15; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Tue-Sun) at Tripunithura, 12km southeast of Ernakulam en route to Kottayam, was formerly the residence of the Kochi royal family and is an arresting, 49-building palace complex. It now houses the collections of the royal families, as well as 19th-century oil paintings, old coins, sculptures and paintings, and temple models. From Kochi, catch the bus to Tripunithura from MG Rd or Shanmugham Rd, behind the Tourist Reception Centre; an autorickshaw should cost around Rs 225 return with one-hour waiting time.

Cherai Beach

On Vypeen island, 25km from Fort Cochin, **Cherai Beach** might just be Kochi's best-kept secret. It's an enchanting stretch of undeveloped white sand, with miles of lazy backwaters just 300m back from the seashore. Best of all, it's close enough to visit on a day trip from Kochi.

If you plan on staying for more than a day, there are a handful of stylish but unobtrusive resorts around.

Cherai Beach Resort (☎ 0484-2481818; www.cherai-beachresorts.com; Vypeen Island; r Rs 1000-2500, with AC Rs 3500; ☎ ☎) This excellent collection of unique cottages lies around a meandering lagoon, with the beach on one side and backwaters on the other. Bungalows are individually designed using natural materials, in conjunction with either curving walls, split-levels or look-outs onto the backwaters – there's even a tree growing inside one room. We love the tiny, individually hammocked islets connected by walkways. There is a restaurant serving daily buffets (breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 100/300/300) and even lagoon-side wi-fi.

For a budget option, you can try the irregularly open **Fisherman's Village** (r Rs 500-750;

☎ Nov-Mar) a few kilometres further north. It has simple bungalows right near the shore, but the beach here is rocky. At the time of research it was being rehabilitated by a Frenchman.

To get here from Fort Cochin, catch a vehicle ferry to Vypeen Island (per person/scooter Rs 1.50/3) and either hire an autorickshaw from the jetty (around Rs 250) or catch one of the frequent buses (Rs 10, one hour).

Parur & Chennamangalam

Nowhere is the tightly woven religious cloth that is India more apparent than in Parur, 35km north of Kochi. The oldest **synagogue** (Rs 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) in Kerala has been wonderfully renovated and sits in Chennamangalam, around 8km from Parur. It has notable door and ceiling wood reliefs in dazzling colours and an intricately carved wooden ark. Just outside is the oldest tombstone in India, inscribed with the Hebrew date corresponding to 1269. There's a **Jesuit church** and the ruins of a Jesuit college nearby. The Jesuits first arrived in Chennamangalam in 1577 and soon after the first book in Tamil (the written language then used in this part of Kerala) was printed on this spot. From here you can also walk to the **Hindu temple** on the hill overlooking the Periyar River. On the way you'll pass a 16th-century **mosque**, as well as Muslim and Jewish **burial grounds**.

In Parur town, you'll find the **agraharam** (place of Brahmins) – a small street of closely packed and brightly coloured houses. It was settled by Tamil Brahmins, though it may as well have been garden gnomes judging by the houses' fairytale-like appearance.

Parur is compact and locals can point you in the right direction, though Chennamangalam is best visited with a guide. **Indoworld** (Map p1003; ☎ 0484-2367818; www.indoworldtours.com; Heera House, MG Rd, Ernakulam; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 2.30pm Sun) can organise tours (around Rs 600 plus guide). It also has an **office** (Map p1004; Princess St) in Fort Cochin.

For Parur, catch a bus from the KSRTC bus stand in Kochi (Rs 15, one hour, every 10 minutes). From Parur catch a bus (Rs 3) or autorickshaw (Rs 45) to Chennamangalam.

THRISSUR (TRICHUR)

☎ 0487 / pop 330,067

While the rest of Kerala has its fair share of celebrations, Thrissur remains the cultural cherry on the festival cake. With a list of brash festivals as long as a temple elephant's

trunk, the whole region supports multiple institutions that are nursing the dying classical Kerala performing arts back to health. It is a busy, bustling place, home to a community of Nestorian Christians, whose denomination dates back to the 3rd century AD. The popular Sri Krishna Temple (33km northeast of Thrissur; see p1017) and performing-arts school Kerala Kalamandalam (see p1017) are nearby. Plan to get here during the rambunctious festival season (November to mid-May).

Orientation & Information

There's HDFC, UTI and Federal Bank ATMs in town, accepting all foreign cards.

DTPC office (☎ 2320800; Palace Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

Lava Rock Internet Café (Kuruppam Rd; per hr Rs 20;

☎ 8.30am-10.30pm)

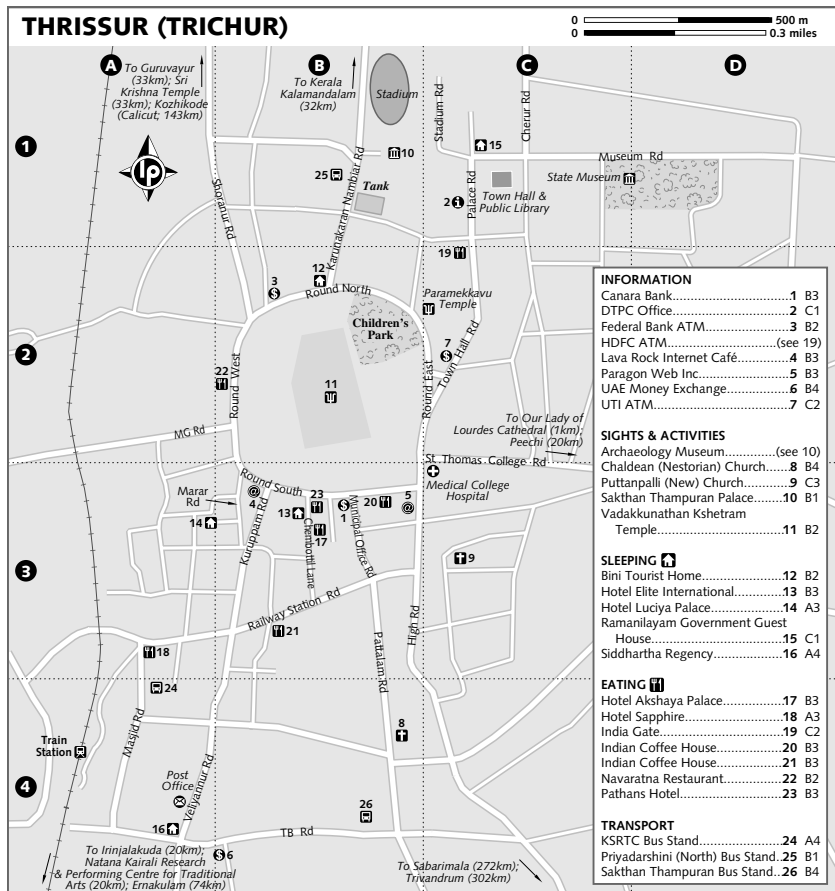
Paragon Web Inc (2nd fl, High Rd; per hr Rs 15;

☎ 8am-10.30pm)

UAE Money Exchange (☎ 2445668; TB Rd; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1pm Sun) Next to the Casino Hotel.

Sights & Activities

One of the oldest in the state, **Vadakkunathan Kshetram Temple** crowns the hill at the epicentre of Thrissur. Finished in classic Kerala architecture, only Hindus are allowed inside, though the mound surrounding the temple has sweeping metropolis views and is a popular spot to loiter. There are also a number of inspiring churches, including **Our Lady of**



Lourdes Cathedral, a massive cathedral with an underground shrine; **Puttanpalli (New) Church**, which has towering, pure-white spires visible from all round town; and the **Chaldean (Nestorian) Church**, which is unique in its complete lack of pictorial representations of Jesus.

The **Archaeology Museum** (admission Rs 6; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is in the 200-year-old **Sakthan Thampuran Palace**. Wandering through its arrow-guided maze you get to see some worthy artefacts, including 12th-century Keralan bronze sculptures, earthenware pots big enough to cook children in, decadent remnants of Kochi's royalty, and an extraordinary 1500kg wooden treasury box covered with iron spikes and locks.

In a state where festivals are a way of life, Thrissur is the standout district for temple revelry. Some of the highlights include **Thrissur Pooram** (April/May), Kerala's biggest and most colourful temple festival – expect processions of elephants; **Uthralikavu Pooram** (March/April), where the climactic day sees 20 elephants circling the shrine; and **Thypooya Maholsavam** (January/February), with a spectacular *kavadiyattam* (a form of ritualistic dance) procession where hundreds of dancers carry tall, ornate structures called *kavadis* on their heads.

Sleeping

Ramanilayam Government Guest House (☎ 2332016; cnr Palace & Museum Rds; s/d Rs 165/220; 🏠) This is the best-value place in town, if you can get in. Huge rooms with balconies are painted a particularly calming shade of green, and it's set in big grounds. Ring ahead, or just show up and try sweet talking them.

Bini Tourist Home (☎ 2335703; Round North; s/d Rs 300/350, with AC Rs 400/550) This massive U-shaped complex has big, clean and respectable-value rooms – all with TV. The staff seem bewildered by foreign visitors.

Hotel Elite International (☎ 2421033; mail@hotelelitinternational.com; Chembottil Lane; s/d from Rs 391/483, with AC Rs 517/644; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Not quite elite, but better than average and the decent rooms all have balconies – though some are noisy. The staff can be brisk. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Luciya Palace (☎ 2424731; luciyapalace@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 450/575, with AC Rs 675/775; 🏠) Considerably more splendid from the outside than inside, this hotel off Marar Rd has reasonably comfortable rooms. Some of the non-AC rooms are nicer than those with AC.

Siddhartha Regency (☎ 2424773; cnr TB & Veliyan-nur Rds; s/d Rs 750/900; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This is excellent value, with comely rooms decked out in simple but pleasant décor – and there's a pool!

Eating

Pathans Hotel (Round South; dishes from Rs 20) Clean and cafeteria-esque, this atmospheric place is popular with families for lunch and has a sweets counter downstairs.

Hotel Sapphire (Railway Station Rd; dishes Rs 20-60) Another place bustling for lunch-time biryanis (Rs 32 to Rs 49), this one's close to the train and bus stations for a quick meal between trips.

India Gate (Palace Rd; dishes around Rs 25) In the same building as the HDFC Bank, this is a bright, pure-veg place serving an unbeatable range of dosas, including jam, cheese and cashew versions.

Navaratna Restaurant (Round West; dishes Rs 30-80; ☎ lunch & dinner; 🏠 🍷) Cool dark and intimate, this upmarket, North Indian veg place has excellent lunch-time meals (Rs 60).

Also try:

Hotel Akshaya Palace (Chembottil Lane; dishes Rs 15-50) Veg and biryani dishes.

Indian Coffee House Branches at Round South and Railway Station Rd.

Getting There & Away

BUS

KSRTC buses leave around every 30 minutes from the KSRTC bus stand for Trivandrum (Rs 170, 7½ hours), Kochi (Rs 46, two hours), Calicut (Rs 72, 3½ hours), Palakkad (Rs 37, 1½ hours) and Kottayam (Rs 64, four hours). Hourly buses go to Coimbatore (Rs 61, three hours). There are also buses to Ponnani (Rs 25, 1½ hours) and Prumpavoor (Rs 30, two hours), for connections to Munnar.

The large, private Sakthan Thampuran stand has buses for Guruvayur (Rs 14, one hour) and Irinjalakuda (Rs 11, 45 minutes). The smaller, private Priyadarshini (also called north) stand has many buses bound for Shoranur and Palakkad, Pollachi and Coimbatore. There are also buses from here to Cheruthuruthy (Rs 17, 1½ hours, every 10 minutes).

TRAIN

Services run regularly to Ernakulam (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 30/188/266, two hours) and Calicut (Rs 41/213/295, 3½ hours). There are also trains running to Palakkad (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 101/188/266, two hours) via Shoranur.

AROUND THRISSUR

The Hindu-only **Sri Krishna Temple** at Guruvayur, 33km northwest of Thrissur, is perhaps the most famous in Kerala. Said to be created by Guru, preceptor of the gods, and Vayu, god of wind, the temple is believed to date from the 16th century and is renowned for its healing powers. The temple's elephants (over 50 at last count) are kept at an old Zamorin palace, Punnathur Kota. An annual and spectacular **Elephant Race** is held here in February or March.

Keralam Kalamandalam (☎ 04884-262418; www.kalamandalam.com), 32km northeast of Thrissur at Cheruthuruthy, is a champion of Kerala's traditional art renaissance. Using an ancient Gurukula system of learning, students undergo intensive study in Kathakali, *mohiniattam* (classical dance), *kootiattam* (traditional Sanskrit drama), percussion, voice and violin. Structured **visits** (per person incl lunch US\$18; ☎ 9.30am-1pm) are available, including a tour around the theatre and classes. Individually tailored introductory courses are offered one subject at a time (between six and 12 months; around Rs 1500 per month, plus Rs 1500 for accommodation).

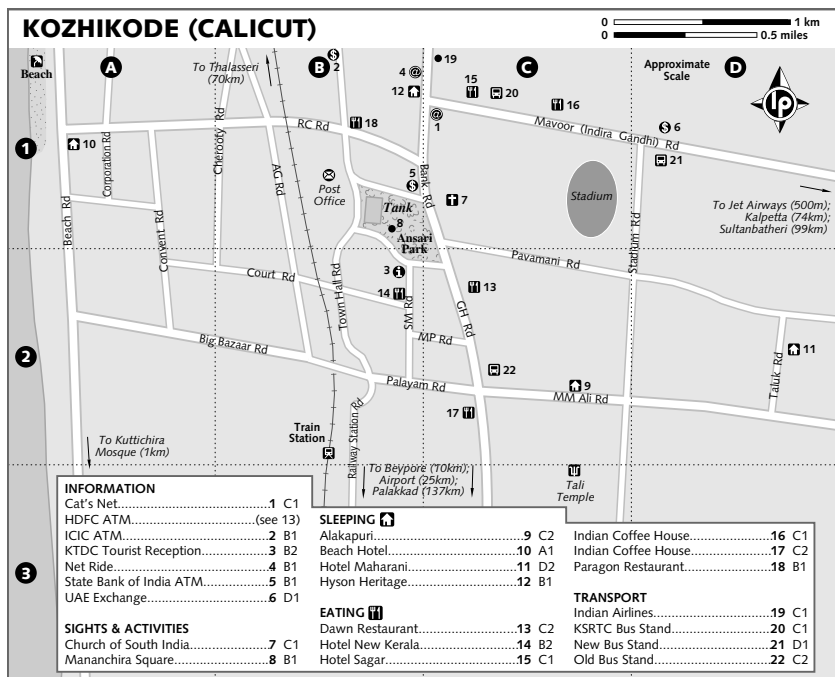
Natana Kairali Research & Performing Centre for Traditional Arts (☎ 0480-2825559; natanakairali@gmail.com), 20km south of Thrissur near Irinjalakuda, offers training in traditional arts, including rare forms of puppetry and dance. Short appreciation courses (usually about one month) are available to foreigners. In December each year, the centre holds five days of *mohiniyattam* (dance of the temptress) performances, a form of classical Keralan women's dance.

NORTHERN KERALA

KOZHIKODE (CALICUT)

☎ 0495 / pop 880,168

Always a prosperous trading town, Calicut was once the capital of the formidable Zamorin dynasty. Vasco da Gama first landed near Calicut in 1498, on his way to snatch a share of the subcontinent for king and country (Portugal that is). These days, trade depends mostly on exporting Indian labour to the Middle East. There's not a lot for tourists to see, though it's a good break in the journey and is the jumping-off point for Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.



Information

There are HDFC and State Bank of India ATMs in town.

Cat's Net (Mavoor Rd; per hr Rs 20) Open 24 hours – though not always in a row.

KTDC Tourist Reception (☎ 2722391; Malabar Mansion, SM Rd) Rudimentary tourist information.

Net Ride (Bank Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Sat)

UAE Exchange (☎ 2723164; Mavoor Rd; ☎ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Sat, to 1.30pm Sun).

Sights

Mananchira Square was the former courtyard of the Zamorins, and preserves the original spring-fed tank. The 650-year-old **Kuttichira Mosque** is in an attractive four-storey wooden building supported by wooden pillars and painted brilliant aqua, blue and white. Burnt down by the Portuguese in 1510, it was rescued and rebuilt to tell the tale. The **Church of South India** was established by Swiss missionaries in 1842 and has unique Euro-Keralan architecture.

Calicut's **beach**, north of the Beach Hotel, is a lovely place to stroll in the late afternoon.

Sleeping

Alakapuri (☎ 2723451-54; www.alakapurihotels.com; MM Ali Rd; s/d from Rs 150/550, with AC Rs 450/650; 🏠) Around a green lawn (complete with fountain!) this place is off the road and a little quieter than most. Rooms come in all different sizes and prices, and while a little scuffed are tidy and reasonable value.

Hotel Maharani (☎ 2723101; www.hotelmaharani.com; Taluk Rd; d without/with AC from Rs 400/800; 🏠) With abundant greenery, a lush garden and palms all around, it's a shame the rooms are spartan and a bit worn. Regardless, it's a great place to get away from the city noise.

Hyson Heritage (☎ 2766726; www.hysonheritage.com; Bank Rd; s/d from Rs 475/600, with AC from Rs 900/1200; 🏠) At this place you get a fair bit of swank for your rupee. The standard rooms are tidy, spacious and comfortable, while the massive deluxe AC rooms come with bathtubs and bad art.

Beach Hotel (☎/fax 2762055; www.beachheritage.com; Beach Rd; r without/with AC Rs 1200/1400; 🏠) Built in 1890 to house the Malabar British Club, this is now a dainty 10-room hotel. Beach-facing rooms have bathtubs and secluded verandas; all the rooms are tastefully furnished and have plenty of character. This is easily the best place to stay in Calicut.

Eating

Hotel Sagar (Mavoor Rd; dishes from Rs 20; ☎ 6am–2am) This is a stylish and breezy veg and nonveg place with biryanis (including fish, Rs 60) and meals at lunchtime.

Paragon Restaurant (Kannur Rd; dishes Rs 28–90) Not as flash as the sign would have you believe, this place comes highly recommended for veg and nonveg dishes and is packed to the rafters come lunchtime to prove it.

Dawn Restaurant (GH Rd; dishes Rs 60–150, buffet Rs 126; 🏠) The restaurant at the Hotel Malabar does multicuisine well, serving inventive Indian dishes and Keralan specials to truly awful, loud muzak.

For tasty, cheap meals also try the following: **Indian Coffee House** (Mavoor Rd) Great for breakfast; there's also a branch on GH Rd.

Hotel New Kerala (SM Rd; dishes Rs 12–50) Full daily for lunch-time set meals (Rs 30) and biryanis.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Jet Airways (☎ 2740518; 29 Mavoor Rd) flies daily to Mumbai (US\$200) – as does **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2766243; Eroth Centre, Bank Rd) for the same price. It also has daily flights to Chennai (US\$137), Delhi (US\$382) and Coimbatore (US\$77), and twice-weekly flights to Goa (US\$200).

BUS

The **KSRTC bus stand** (Mavoor Rd) has buses to Bengaluru (via Mysore, Rs 188, eight hours, 10 daily), Mangalore (Rs 148, seven hours, four daily) and to Ooty (Rs 83, 5½ hours, four daily). There are also frequent buses to Thrissur (Rs 74, three hours), Trivandrum (going via Alleppey and Ernakulam; Rs 248, 10 hours, eight daily) and Kottayam (Rs 146, seven hours, 13 daily). For Wayanad district, buses leave every 15 minutes heading to Sultanbatheri (Rs 57, three hours) via Kalpetta (Rs 45, two hours).

The new bus stand, further east along Mavoor Rd, has long-distance private buses.

TRAIN

The train station is south of Mananchira Sq. There are trains to Mangalore (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 64/310/445, five hours) via Kannur (Rs 34/188/266, two hours), Ernakulam (Rs 57/281/402, five hours) via Thrissur (Rs 41/213/295, 3½ hours), and to Trivandrum (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 190/505/716, 11 hours).

Heading southeast, there are trains to Coimbatore (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 101/271/388, five hours), via Palakkad (Rs 101/221/316, three hours). These trains then head north to the centres of Bengaluru, Chennai and Delhi.

Getting Around

Calicut has a glut of autorickshaws. It's about Rs 10 from the station to the KSRTC bus stand or most hotels.

WAYANAD WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

☎ 04936

If Kerala is 'God's Country', this must be his garden of Eden. Part of a remote forest reserve that spills over into national parks in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, Wayanad lies cocooned in the hills of the Western Ghats. Famed among Keralans for its jaw-dropping beauty, the landscape is a green medley of rice paddies, untouched forests, spice plantations and more rice paddies (the name translates to 'country of paddy fields'). A convenient stopover point between Bengaluru or Mysore and Kochi, the region gets surprisingly few visitors, though it's one of the few places you're almost guaranteed to spot wild elephants. Other wildlife that roam the forests here include sambar and spotted deer, Indian bison, langur monkeys and, drumroll, occasionally tigers.

Orientation & Information

The sanctuary, covering an area of 345 sq km, consists of two separate pockets – **Muthanga** in the east of the district, on the border of Tamil Nadu, and **Tholpetty** in the north, on the border with Karnataka. Three major towns in Wayanad district make good bases for exploring the sanctuary – **Kalpetta** in the south, **Sultanbatheri** (also known as Sultan Battery) in the east and **Mananthavadi** in the northwest.

The extremely helpful **DTPC office** (☎ 04936-202134; www.dtpcwayanad.com; Kalpetta; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) can help organise tours, permits and trekking. There's a **UAE Exchange** (☎ 04936-207636; Main Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1.30pm Sun) in Kalpetta, and Federal Bank or Canara Bank ATMs can be found in each of the three main towns, as well as internet cafés.

Sights & Activities

VISITING THE SANCTUARY

Entry to both parts of the **sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100, camera/video Rs 25/150; ☎ 7am-5pm) is

only permitted with a park guard (Rs 200); you can organise this through the DTPC office, with your hotel or at the park's entrance offices.

At Tholpetty, early morning 1½-hour **jeep tours** (Rs 500 incl guide) are a great way to spot wildlife; afternoon tours are also available. Pachyderm Palace (see p1020) arranges wildlife-spotting treks into the areas surrounding the Tholpetty sanctuary.

At Muthanga, two-hour **jeep tours** (Rs 350 incl guide) and four-hour **guided walks** (Rs 300) are available.

The DTPC and most hotels arrange guided **jeep tours** (up to five people, Rs 1700 to Rs 2000) of the sanctuaries and surrounding sights.

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are some top opportunities for **trekking** around the district, including the precipice of **Chembra Peak**, at 2100m the tallest summit; **Vellarimala**, with great views and lots of wildlife-spotting opportunities; **Pakshipathalam**, a formation of large boulders deep in the forest; and a number of **waterfalls**. Permits are necessary and available from forest officers in South or North Wayanad. The accommodating DTPC office in Kalpetta organises permits, trekking guides (Rs 500 per day), camping equipment (Rs 200 per person) and transport – pretty much anything you might need to organise your own trek. It also runs four-hour bamboo rafting trips (Rs 950) from June to December.

Thought to be one of the oldest on the subcontinent, **Thirunelly Temple** (☎ dawn-dusk) is around 10km from Tholpetty. While non-Hindus cannot enter, the ancient and intricate pillars and stone carvings, set against a backdrop of soaring, mist-covered peaks, is an astounding sight no matter what your creed.

The 13th-century **Jain temple** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm), near Sultanbatheri, has splendid stone carvings and is an important monument to the region's strong historical Jain presence. Close by, near Ambalavayal, are the **Edakal Caves** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-5pm), with petroglyphs thought to date back over 3000 years and awe-inspiring views of Wayanad district. In the same area, **Wayanad Heritage Museum** (Ambalavayal; admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-5pm) exhibits headgear, weapons, pottery, carved stone and other artefacts dating back to the 15th century that shed light on Wayanad's significant Adivasi population (around 17%

of the total population). The labelling is poor, but the friendly guardian is happy to explain what's on display.

The picture-perfect **Pookot Lake** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-6pm) is 3km before Vythiri. Geared up for visitors, it has well-maintained gardens, a cafeteria, playground and paddle/row boats for rent (Rs 30/50 per 20 minutes). It's still peaceful, particularly if you take a half-hour stroll around the lake's perimeter.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a **seramby** (wooden hut; d Rs 900) at Tholpetty near the sanctuary entrance, though you'll have to bring your own food. Contact the **wildlife warden** (☎ 04936-220454; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) at Sultanbatheri for details.

PPS Tourist Home (☎ 04936-203431; www.pps.touristhome.com; Kalpetta; s/d Rs 150/250, deluxe d Rs 500-550; ☎) This agreeable and friendly place in the middle of Kalpetta has rooms that are clean, good sized and comfy. You can arrange trips to Wayanad (Rs 1700 per carload) here or hikes up Chembra Peak (Rs 600, six hours).

Hotel Regency (☎ 04936-220512; Sultanbatheri; s/d from Rs 350/400, with AC from Rs 750/800; ☎) The best deal in Sultanbatheri, this new place is not particularly inspired, but with large, restful, tidy and quiet rooms it's still a winner. The deluxe rooms differ from the standard ones in price only.

Pachyderm Palace (☎ 0484-2371761; touristdesk@satyam.net.in; Tholpetty; r per person incl meals Rs 1250-1500) This comfortable house lies huddled outside the gate of Tholpetty Wildlife Sanctuary – handy for early morning treks, tours and ad hoc wildlife viewing. The varied rooms are simple and spotless, but the stilt-bungalows surrounded by forest are the pick of the litter. The Kerala food is outstanding. Make reservations through the Tourist Desk in Ernakulam (see p1005).

Stream Valley Cottages (☎ 0436-255860; www.streamvalleycottages.com; Vythiri; d Rs 2500) These huge, modern cottages are set by a small stream among the hills, about 2.5km off the main road before Vythiri. Fully self-contained, with kitchen, separate living area and balcony, there's peace here aplenty. Traditional Kerala meals are available (Rs 250 per day).

Tranquil (☎ 04936-220244; www.tranquilresort.com; Kuppamudi Estate, Kolagapara; s/d €190/240, deluxe s/d €270/340; ☎) This truly charming and luxurious homestay is in the middle of 160 hectares of pepper, coffee, vanilla and cardamom

plantations. The elegant house has sweeping verandas filled with plants and handsome furniture. The owners are excellent hosts and arrange tours of the area (included). They also have the most luxurious treehouse we've ever seen (single/double €240/300). Prices include meals and tax.

You could also try:

Dew Drops (☎ 04935-242; Mysore Rd, Mananthavadi; s from Rs 150/200) The only half-decent place to stay in Mananthavadi.

Green Gates Hotel (☎ 04936-202001; www.green.gateshotel.com; Kalpetta; s/d Rs 1250/1500, cottages s/d Rs 2750/3000; ☎ ☎) Well-designed cottages with a blend of modern and natural materials.

Getting There & Around

Buses brave the windy roads between Calicut and Sultanbatheri (Rs 57) via Kalpetta (Rs 45) every 30 minutes. Private buses also run between Kannur and Mananthavadi every 45 minutes (Rs 48, 2½ hours). One bus per day passes through Sultanbatheri at 1pm on its way to Ooty (Rs 76, four hours), and buses for Mysore leave every 30 minutes.

Local buses connect Mananthavadi, Kalpetta and Sultanbatheri every 10 to 20 minutes (Rs 12 to Rs 18, 45 minutes to 1¼ hours). You can rent jeeps to get from one town to the next; they cost about Rs 450 to 600 each way – look for them lined up near the bus stands.

There are plenty of autorickshaws for trips around the district, and the DTPC can arrange car rental (from around Rs 1300 per day).

KANNUR (CANNANORE)

☎ 0497 / pop 498,175

Under the Kolathiri rajas, Kannur was a major port bristling with international trade – explorer Marco Polo christened it a 'great emporia of spice trade'. Since then, the usual colonial suspects, including the Portuguese, Dutch and British, have had a go at shaping Kannur. Today it's an agreeable, though unexciting, town known mostly for its weaving industry and cashew trade, with an excellent beach at Costa Malabari and incredible *theyyam* possession performances (see opposite).

Information

The **DTPC** (☎ 2706336; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), opposite the KSRTC bus stand, and the **information counter** (☎ 8am-7pm) at the train station can supply maps of Kannur and a few brochures.

There are Federal Bank and State Bank of India ATMs adjacent to the bus stand, and an HDFC ATM about 50m from it, along with a **UAE Exchange** (☎ 2708818; Mahatma Mandir Junction; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, to 1.30pm Sun).

Sights

Kannur is the best place to see the ritual dance **theyyam** (see the boxed text, below); there should be a *theyyam* on somewhere reasonably close by most nights of the year. To find it, ask at Costa Malabari (see right), or try the **Kerala Folklore Academy** (☎ 2778090), near Chirakkal Pond, Valapattanam.

The Portuguese built **St Angelo Fort** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) in 1505 from brilliantly red laterite stone on the promontory northwest of town. It's serene and has excellent views of some palm-fringed beaches.

Established in 1955, the **Kausallaya Weavers' Co-Operative** (☎ 2835279; ☎ 9am-6pm) is the largest in Kannur and occupies a creaky building clicking with the sound of looms. You can stop by for a quick tour – it's 8km south of Kannur. This region is known for the manufacture of beedis, those tiny Indian cigarettes deftly rolled in green leaves. One of the largest, and purportedly best, manufacturers is the **Kerala Dinesh Beedi Co-Operative** (☎ 2835280; ☎ 8-5pm Tue-Sat), with a factory at Thottada, 7km south of Kannur. Either of these cooperatives is a Rs 80 (return) autorickshaw ride from Kannur town.

Kairail (☎ 0460-2243460), located 20km north of Kannur, is starting to offer houseboat trips on the unspoilt northern Kerala backwaters. Day cruises for up to 10 people cost Rs 3500, and 24-hour overnight trips for two are Rs 5000.

Sleeping & Eating

Centaur Tourist Home (☎ 2768270; MA Rd; s/d Rs 175/290, with shared bathroom Rs 120/230) This has basic, spacious, clean rooms, across the road from the train station. There are plenty of similar lodges in this area.

Palmgrove Heritage Retreat (☎ 2703182; Mill Rd; s/d from Rs 200/350, with AC Rs 700/800; ☎) In a big heritage house packed with antique furniture and bric-a-brac, there's a variety of quiet, smallish-but-snug rooms set around lots of greenery.

Government Guest House (☎ 2706426; d Rs 220, with AC Rs 575; ☎) Ostensibly only for government officials (but it will let visitors in if there's room), this is great value – huge, bright rooms, all with balcony, in a sprawling complex by the ocean. Phone ahead.

Mascot Beach Resort (☎ 2708445; s/d Rs 700/900, with AC Rs 1000/1200; ☎) Near the Government Guest House, this also has grand views of the ocean from its comfy AC rooms, though the cheaper options are tucked away and a bit cheap.

ourpick Costa Malabari (☎ 0484-2371761; touristdesk@satyam.net.in; r Rs 1250-1500 per person incl meals) In a small village and five minutes' walk

THEYYAM

Kerala's most popular ritualistic art form, *theyyam*, is believed to predate Hinduism and to have developed from folk dances performed in conjunction with harvest celebrations. An intensely local ritual, it's often performed in the *kavus* (sacred groves) that are abundant throughout northern Kerala (there are up to 800 in Kannur district alone).

Theyyam refers to both the form or shape of the deity or hero portrayed, and to the ritual. There are around 450 different *theyyams*, each with a distinct costume; face paint, bracelets, breastplates, skirts, garlands and especially headdresses are exuberant, intricately crafted and sometimes huge (up to 6m or 7m tall). Today's *theyyam* performances have morphed to incorporate popular Hindu deities and even Muslim characters.

The performer prepares for the ritual with a period of abstinence, fasting and meditation, which extends into the laborious make-up and costume session. During the performance, the performer loses his physical identity and speaks, moves and blesses the devotees as if he were the deity. There is frenzied dancing and wild drumming, and a surreal, otherworldly atmosphere is created, the kind of atmosphere in which a deity indeed might, if it so desired, manifest itself in human form.

The *theyyam* season is October to May, during which time there will be an annual ritual at each *kavu*. *Theyyams* are also often held to bring good fortune to important events, such as marriages and house warmings. See above for details on how to find one.

from an idyllic and secluded beach, this place has a few bright, spacious rooms in an old hand-loom factory. There's a huge communal space and lots of comfy lounging areas dot the outside, plus it has expanded to include a second house perched dramatically on a sea cliff. The home-cooked Keralan food is plentiful and, frankly, might just be the best in the country. Kurien, your gracious host, is an expert on the astonishing *theyyam* ritual (see boxed text, p1021) and can help arrange a visit. It's 8km from Kannur town; a taxi from the train station is around Rs 80. Make reservations at the Tourist Desk in Ernakulam.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent daily buses to Mysore (Rs 136, eight hours) and a few to Mangalore (Rs 76, four hours). Most departures to Calicut (Rs 52, 2½ hours) and Ernakulam (Rs 170, eight hours) leave in the afternoon and evening. There's one bus daily to Ooty (via Wayanad, Rs 170, nine hours). Frequent private buses to Mananthavadi (for Wayanad, Rs 48, 2½ hours) leave from the private bus stand, located between the KSRTC stand and the train station.

There are several daily trains to Mangalore (2nd class/3AC/2AC Rs 44/221/316, three hours), Calicut (Rs 34/188/266, two hours) and Ernakulam (Rs 75/361/518, seven hours).

BEKAL & AROUND

☎ 0467

Bekal (and nearby Palakunnu and Udma) in Kerala's far north boast unspoilt white-sand beaches. Word on the street is they form the palm-fringed finish line for several large-scale, luxury resorts hoping to transform the area into the next Kovalam. As yet, there are few decent places to stay (and none near a beach) and getting around can be a real pain, making it a DIY destination for off-the-beaten-track adventurers. Because it's a predominantly Muslim area, it's important to keep local sensibilities in mind, especially at the beach.

The laterite-brick **Bekal Fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 8am-5pm), built between 1645 and 1660, sits on Bekal's rocky headland and houses a small Hindu temple and plenty of goats.

Kappil Beach, 6km north of Bekal, has fine sand and calm water, but beware of shifting sandbars.

Bekal Boat Stay (☎ 0476-3953311; bekalboats@rediffmail.com; Kottappuram), 22km south of Bekal,

is one of the first enterprises in the region to offer houseboat trips (Rs 6000/8000 per 24 hours for two/four people).

Sleeping & Eating

Sleeping options are mostly scattered between Kanhangad (12km south) and Kasaragod (10km north).

K-Tees Residency (☎ 3950208; www.kteesresidency.com; Bekal; s/d from Rs 200/350) The only place near Bekal passing muster in the hygiene department, it's squished between the railway and the road and has big, clean rooms.

Hotel Bekal International (☎ 2204271; www.hotelbekal.com; Kanhangad; s/d from Rs 200/350, d with AC from Rs 550; ☎) The most comfortable hotel around, it's 12km south of Bekal. The huge complex has a green fetish, in everything from walls to '70s chairs, and a big choice of spacious, immaculate (green) rooms.

Gitanjali Heritage (☎ 2234159; www.gitanjaliheritage.com; s/d with meals US\$50/75) Five kilometres from Bekal, this place is deep in the inland villages, surrounded by paddy fields. It's an intimate homestay in a graceful heritage home, with comfortable, higgledy-piggledy rooms filled with ancestral furniture and polished wood.

Getting There & Around

Frequent local trains stop at Kotikulam, in the village of Palakunnu 3km from Bekal. Kanhangad, 13km south, is the major stop. There are many buses to/from Kasaragod (Rs 10, 20 minutes), the nearest big town, and an autorickshaw at Bekal Junction can take you to/from Palakunnu and Udma (Rs 20 to 30).

LAKSHADWEEP

pop 60,595

A string of 36 palm-covered coral islands 300km off the coast of Kerala, Lakshadweep is as stunning as it is difficult to get to. Only 10 of the islands are inhabited, mostly with Sunni Muslim fishermen, and foreigners are only allowed to stay on a handful of these. With fishing and coir production the main sources of income, local life on the islands remains highly traditional and a caste system divides the islanders between Koya (land owners), Malmi (sailors) and Melachery (farmers).

The real attraction of the islands lies under the water: the 4200 sq km of pristine archipelago lagoons, unspoiled coral reefs and

warm waters are a magnet for flipper-toting travellers and divers alike. Lakshadweep can only be visited on a pre-organised package trip – all listed accommodation prices are for the peak October to May season and include permits and meals.

Information

Sports (Society for the Promotion of Recreational Tourism & Sports; Map p1003; ☎ 0484-2668387; www.lakshadweeptourism.com; IG Rd, Willingdon Island; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is the main tourism organisation.

PERMITS

Foreigners are limited to staying in pricey resorts; a special permit (one month's notice) is required and is organised by tour operators, hotels or Sports in Kochi. Foreigners and Indians can stay on Bangaram, Agatti and Kadmat, and Indians can stay in resorts on Minicoy and Kavaratti.

Getting There & Away

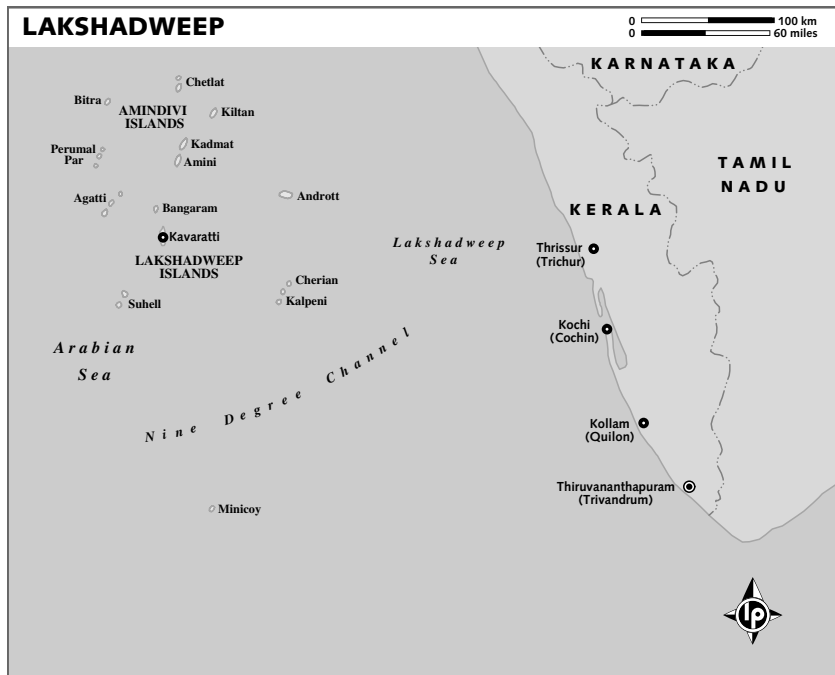
Indian Airlines has daily 9.15am flights Monday to Saturday from Kochi to Agatti Island (US\$200 each way, 1¼ hours). The plane

is a tiny Dornier 228 propeller aircraft and passengers are restricted to 10kg of luggage. Book well in advance. As this book went to press, Kingfisher Airlines had just started up flights between Kochi and Agatti Island with bigger planes and for half the price (around US\$200 return). Flights leave Kochi Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 12.50pm and return the same day at 2.40pm – though this may all change so its best to check its website (www.flykingfisher.com) for the latest information. A 1½-hour transfer by boat from Agatti to Bangaram costs an extra US\$50 return. A boat trip to Agatti from Kochi is US\$50 one way (16 to 20 hours).

For Kadmat, there are scheduled boat departures from Kochi between October and May (US\$75 return in AC seats, including food, 18 to 20 hours each way) – allow a stay of three to five days plus travelling time. Get in touch with Sports in Kochi for details.

BANGARAM ISLAND

The 50-hectare island is fringed with pure sand, and the sight of the moon slipping beneath the lagoon horizon is very nearly worth



DIVING

Lakshadweep is a diver's dream, with excellent visibility and a plethora of marine life living on undisturbed coral reefs. The best time to dive is between mid-October and mid-May when the seas are calm and visibility is 20m to 40m. During the monsoon the weather and strong currents severely limit these opportunities and many dive outfits close up shop.

Lacadives (☎ 022-66627381-82; www.lacadives.com; E-20 Everest Bldg, Taredo Rd, Mumbai) runs dive centres on Bangaram and Kadmat Islands. Costs can vary: a CMAS one-star course costs US\$400, while experienced divers pay US\$40 per dive (plus equipment rental), with discounts available for multiple dives. Information is available through the hotels or directly through Lacadives in Mumbai; its website also has details about accommodation packages. The diving school on Agatti Island is run by **Goa Diving** (☎ 0832-2555117; www.goadiving.com).

From Kadmat Island, dives range from 9m to 20m in depth and some of the better sites include the North Cave, the Wall, Jack Point, Shark Alley, the Potato Patch, Cross Currents and Sting Ray City. Around Bangaram, good spots include the 32m-deep wreck of the *Princess Royale*, Manta Point, Life, Grand Canyon and the impressive sunken reef at Perumal Par.

Because of weight restrictions on aircraft (10kg), most divers rely on equipment provided on the islands. For a guide to environmentally friendly diving, see the boxed text, p94.

the expense. Activities include diving, snorkelling, deep-sea fishing and sailing.

Bangaram Island Resort (www.cghearth.com; s/d with full board Oct-Apr US\$280/290, 4-person deluxe cottages with meals US\$525) is run by the **CGH Earth group** (☎ 0484-2668221; bangaramisland@cghearth.com), and is administered from its hotel in Kochi. Shop around before you leave home – some operators can secure a better deal.

AGATTI ISLAND

The village on this 2.7-sq-km island has several mosques, which you can visit if dressed modestly. There's no alcohol on the island. Snorkelling, kayaking, glass-bottom boat trips and jaunts to nearby islands can be arranged.

Agatti Island Beach Resort (☎ 0484-2362232; www.agattiislandresorts.com; tw per person for 3 nights US\$305-345,

with AC US\$430-470; 🏠) sits on two beaches at the southern tip of the island and offers a range of packages. The resort has simple, low-rise beach cottages, designed to be comfortably cool without AC, and a restaurant for 20 people.

KADMAT ISLAND

Kadmat Beach Resort (☎ 0484-2668387; laksports_2004@vsnl.net; s/d for Indians Rs 2000/3000, with AC Rs 2500/4000, s/d for foreigners US\$75/125, with AC US\$100/175; 🏠) is administered by Sports (see p1023).

MINICOY ISLAND

Indians wishing to stay on remote Minicoy can rent newly built cottages at **Swaying Palm** (s/d Rs 2000/3000, with AC Rs 2500/4000; 🏠). Boat transport from Kochi (tourist/1st/deluxe class Rs 3500/6000/7000 return) must be added to the prices.

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