

INDIA
TODAY

Travel Plus

QUARTERLY



**HERITAGE
HOTELS IN THE
HIMALAYAS**

**BIHAR'S
BUDDHIST
TRAIL**

The beachfront
of Neeleshwar
Hermitage in
north Kerala

NORTH KERALA

**MAGIC OF
MALABAR**



OPEN TO THE FAITHFUL
The 14th century Mishkal mosque in Kozhikode

THE INFORMATION

KOZHIKODE

Getting there: Calicut International Airport (CCJ) is around 25km (30min) from the main Kozhikode town, while Kannur Airport is 1hr40min away. Kozhikode railway station is connected to all major cities via express trains

Stay: The Raviz, Kadavu, next to the Chaliyar river. From ₹9,000 + taxes; www.theraviz.com

Dining: All-day multi-cuisine restaurant, grilled-food speciality restaurant, bar

Activities: Yoga, river cruise, Ayurveda spa

WAYANAD

Getting there: By air to Calicut International Airport, then 3hr by road

Stay: Pepper Trail Heritage Plantation Retreat. From ₹12,000+ taxes; peppertail.in

Dining: Inhouse restaurant. No set menu, all meals pre-ordered

Activities: Guided plantation drive and birdwatching, evening tea tasting

NILESHWAR

Getting there: Nearest airports in Kannur (2hr) and Mangaluru (2hr15min).

Stay: Neeleshwar Hermitage. From Rs 11,900 + taxes. Lotus Houseboat: starting from ₹24,600 for one-night stay, ₹44,095 for two nights. Two-night journeys span a distance of 25km one way


Dining: Indian cuisine restaurant, speciality seafood restaurant

Activities: Guided village walk, seaside yoga sessions,

Ayurveda health and wellness centre, cooking classes (charges apply), visits to experience Theyyam performances

The trip logistics were handled by **Discovery Journeys India**, who have been offering tailor-made holidays in India for over 30 years

Contact: enquiry@discoveryjourneysindia.com, www.discoveryjourneysindia.com



THROUGH TIME, TASTE AND TRANQUILITY

From spice-scented markets and sea-facing sanctuaries to misty hill trails and ancient rituals, North Kerala reveals a soulful, lesser-known side of God's Own Country

By Ishani Nandi

It all begins, as it often does in Kerala, with people around a table, conversation and food. At Hotel Jineesh, a small, bare-bones eatery in Chaliyam, my order arrives on a steel plate filled to the brim and placed on a rough-hewn, wooden table. Three men, already seated, see mid-chat that there's no room elsewhere, and wave us over to settle next to them. I slide my plastic stool forward to this Malabar classic: *kallumakkaya*—freshly harvested mussels simmering in a light gravy mix of its own juices, coconut slivers and fragrant spices—and a thick slice of pathri, a golden-fried, rice-flour roundel. I dig in as a fresh batch of batter-fried bananas are carried out by a sari-clad woman, whose face brightens into a smile as hungry locals trickle in, eager to start the day right.

If Kerala's south were a monsoon downpour, the north would be its petrichor. Unlike its well-publicised southern sibling, North Kerala remains largely untouched by the stampede of mass tourism, inviting you in with the promise of raw landscapes, languid rhythms and a storied history.



ON TO THE HIGHLANDS

ARBOREAL LUXURY

Top, the Woodpecker Tree House in the Pepper Trail estate; below, the bedroom in the tree house

My ride to Wayanad curves north-eastward into forested hills, where hairpin bends and misty slopes make for a scenic drive. The sun hangs low as our wheels roll into the lush haven that is Pepper Trail estate. Set deep within a former colonial plantation, Pepper Trail feels less like a resort and more like a secret camp.

Over breakfast in the main pavilion, I meet owner Anand Jayan, whose grandfather P. Balram Kurup bought the 200-acre coffee, spice and tea estate in 1932 from a Scotsman. Anand's is the hand behind the retreat's thoughtful, sustainable and immersive soul. Perfectly balancing the wilderness experience with elevated comfort, the 150-year-old two-suite colonial bungalow with its back-to-roots aesthetic delivers on its promise of nostalgia. Two treehouses, built 40 feet high on sturdy jackfruit trees, feel like something out of a fantasy fiction film, and the rooms themselves, while arboreal,

make no compromises on either space or the high-end feel. For the more down-to-earth, the villas boast grande-sized quarters, a front garden, and a forest-facing private infinity pool.

At Wayanad, there's something for everyone: its wildlife sanctuary has bird-watching and safaris, while Soochipara and Meenmutty waterfalls are magnificent after the rains. Further west, Banasura Sagar Dam, Asia's largest earthen dam, tempts with boat rides and viewpoints. Thrill-seekers can hike to Chembra Peak, climb up to the Edakkal Caves where stone-age petroglyphs line the walls, or go zip-lining. History buffs will find the Wayanad Heritage Museum an unassuming gem while retail-hounds can peruse the local markets at Sultan Bathery just 20 minutes away.

It's hard to imagine a more perfect getaway, but the forces of nature tend to follow a different policy from "customer is king". North Kerala tourism faced a trifecta of setbacks with Covid-19, the 2024 floods and recent landslides. Though the tragedy struck a limited geography, the entire district's tourism bookings collapsed. Since then, however, recovery efforts spell hope. Altaf Chapri, who runs Neeleshwar Hermitage, my next and final stop in North Kerala, is enthused by the boom: "Southern Kerala has overgrown. Concrete, crowds... but here, the beaches still breathe. Between on-season swimming, dolphins and migratory birds in the winter, backwaters and treks, or restorative wellness therapies—northern Kerala has it all," he adds.



THE LAND OF LEGENDS

It's a warm, sticky June morning, and I am on the hunt for some of those stories with Rajeesh Raghavan, a travel professional and local-history expert, who is guiding me through Kozhikode. Within minutes into our half-hour drive to the city, he recounts tales from Kozhikode's long and complex past. Along the way, he points to landmarks that reflect its continued presence—a century-old British-built iron bridge still in daily use; the Commonwealth Tile Factory in Feroke, built in 1864, and still operating; the Wadiaji Parsi Anjuman Baug, an 18th-century fire temple, managed and maintained by the Marshalls, a four-member family that is all that remains of Kozhikode's once significant Parsi community.

Two centuries before their arrival, Vasco da Gama reached India by sea in 1498 and opened up trade with Europe, bypassing overland Arab routes. His landing point on Kappad beach, 30 minutes away, is a popular tourist spot. The Portuguese explorer was warmly welcomed by the Zamorins, the erstwhile rulers of Kozhikode, whose keen nose for business turned the city into a major spice and silk emporium.

The Zamorin of Calicut once ruled these streets. Today, their palace is a hospital and the throne room a maternity ward, but their impact is still felt, not least in the city's modern marketplaces. Valiyangadi Market, once the bustling heart of the city's spice and grain trade, remains active today with wholesale dealers in rice, areca nut, and coconut oil. Silk Street, and SM Street (Sweet Meat Street), one of the city's oldest commercial roads, are busy retail hubs

where traditional halwa stalls sit comfortably beside mobile stores and branded outlets.

I sample a variety of the famous "sweet meat" that gives the street its name at the 92-year-old Shankaran Bakery. "Our halwa is originally an Arabian delicacy," Rajeesh says, as I am handed a slice from the jewel-like, soft, candied bricks made of refined flour, sugar, and oil or ghee. My visit coincides with Eid al-Adha, so the shopping hub is deserted: today is all about prayer, family and feasts. In Kozhikode, faith doesn't stand apart—it leans in, like neighbours over a shared wall. The 600-year-old Thali Temple, the 700-year-old Mishkal Mosque, once charred by the Portuguese in 1510, and then rebuilt, ("with wood from the Zamorin's own fort," Rajeesh notes), and the Mother of God cathedral, built on land gifted by the same Hindu ruler, are all a stone's throw away from each other.

As we head to Paragon, the city's iconic restaurant, known for their impeccable food, Sunday lunch crowds and must-have tender-coconut custard, Rajeesh advises caution: "Famous personalities are snuck in through the back," he says with a smile, "We'll have to wait." Indeed, the place is packed, despite it being a holiday, so we grab our custards and savour spicy prawn fry, Malabar biryani, and a raw mango-and-mint mocktail at Adaminte Chayakada (Adam's Tea Shop). Between bites, Rajeesh tells me about a vegetarian crocodile named

Babiya in Kasaragod who, until his recent demise, lived in a temple pond and ate *prasadam*. You just can't make this up. But in "city of truth" Kozhikode, you don't have to.

