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Alleppey

Kerala, India

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Introduction

What is it? A great jump-off point to make a splash in the backwaters of Kerala

Where is it? Kerala

When do I go? November to March

For how long? Two days

STD Code: 0477

The day passes reluctantly, as palm fronds wave sensuously in the wind and the sun plays with the water. This is Alleppey or Alappuzha, a district made unique by an intricate network of canals. Home to the coir industry, most of the boats on the canals are filled with huge bales of coconut fibre. But beyond those are the houseboats, villages afloat on the water, the seductive beauty of the water hyacinth and the huge rush of excitement as snake boats race towards the finish line in August and September. Drift reluctantly with the day and do not be surprised if you turn up in the quiet beauty of the Vembanad lake.

Backwater Ecology

Although the backwaters function as one of the primary tourist attractions in Kerala, ironically, the area is under threat by forces such as population growth, tourism, industry and agriculture. Kerala has 29 major lakes on the backwater system, seven of which drain to the sea. Illegal land reclamation, poses the single greatest threat to this fragile ecosystem. In a little over a century, the total area of water in Kuttanad has been reduced by two-thirds, while mangrove swamps and fish stocks have been decimated by pollution. Land reclamation projects, legal and illegal, have reduced the area of these lakes from 440 sq km in 1968 to less than 350 sq km today (Only one-third of their mid-19th century levels). Pollution and destructive fishing (use of dynamite, poison and very fine nets) has resulted in the extinction of mangroves, crocodiles and migratory fish. Many migratory birds no longer visit the backwaters. To the casual eye, the most visible danger is the spread of water hyacinth (African moss or Nile cabbage), that clog many parts of the canal making it difficult to manoeuvre the boats. But clearly the problems go far deeper than this.

The African moss may seem attractive, starves underwater life of light and oxygen. It is also a symptom of the many serious ecological problems currently affecting the region, whose population density ranges from between two and four times that of other coastal areas in southwest India. This adds pressure on the land, and hence a greater reliance on fertilizers, which eventually work their way into the water causing a buildup of moss.

About Alleppey/Alappuzha

History

Alappuzha gets its historic name from Kerala's past. Ancient and some what optimistic tourist literature referred to it as the 'Venice of the East'. The comparison ends there. Today Alappuzha is a noisy town where prawn farming and the coir industry keep its people busy.

The history of this region in the Palaeolithic age is not clear. Many believe that the coastal regions of Cherthala, Ambapalpuzha and Karthikapally were originally under water and later developed from the salt and silt deposits that helped give them shape.

Kuttanadu, one of the talukas of the present Alappuzha district dates back to the Sangam age when it was equally important. The early Cheras had their homes or kuttuvans (today called houseboats) in Kuttanadu. Christianity spread in this region as early as the first century A D. some of the churches located at Chertala are said to be founded by St Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ. His presence made a tremendous impact on the region.

Dramatic changes influenced Alappuzha once more in the ninth century. This was when the second Chera Empire propagated the spread of religion and culture.

The territories of Kayamkulam, Purakkad and Karappuram emerged as a power base in the 16th century. It was at this time that the Portuguese became part of the political scene, building churches at Purakkad and Arthungal.

Portuguese power declined by the 17th century making way for the Dutch who signed several treaties with the kings of the region.

Although the Dutch helped build a number of factories to store pepper and ginger, it was not long before they got involved in the local politics of the region. This was during the rule of Marthanda Varma, the "Master of Modern Travancore". True to his name, he gave special attention to the development of Mavelikkara as an administrative as well as a commercial centre. It was at this time that the marvellous Krishnapuram palace was constructed.

The Dutch received a setback when the kingdoms of Kayamkulam, Ambalappuzha, Thekkumkur, Vadakkumkur and Karappuram were annexed to Travancore.

In 1816 Anglican missionaries set up their headquarters in Alappuzha. Three years later the first Anglican Church was built. In 1859 the first organised coir factory was started here which produced matting and coir yarn on a loom developed by an English sea captain. It was not long before other British weaving establishments followed suit.

Alappuzha was the first commercial port in the princely state of Travancore. Established by Raja Kesavadas, the Diwan of Travancore, shipping operations became a rarity after the inception of the port at Cochin. Whilst operational in the late 1980s, a total of 414 tonnes of coir, 51,808 tonnes of rice and 24,517 tonnes of wheat was once exported from Alappuzha.

Geography

Alappuzha is situated between Kollam (85 km south) and Kochi (64 km north) on the Malabar Coast. It forms the central part of the backwater network. The geographical peculiarity of Alappuzha is that the shore water level is the same. This gives you the advantage of getting a closer look at the village life on shore while taking a backwater ride. Alappuzha offers a relaxing boat cruise to Kollam along the small canals that line most every path. Country boats of various types criss-cross paths with passengers from all walks of Kerala's rural life ranging from the milkman and newspaper boy to local politicians, priests and wedding parties.

Initially, the town had only one canal. This soon grew into a busy waterway with shops and commercial enterprises on either side of the canal. Commercial interests drew traders from other countries. By the mid 19th century the sea receded a mile, offering more land along the sand strip giving shape to modern Alappuzha.

Climate

Proximity to the Arabian Sea on the west and a network of lakes in between, accounts for the tropical climate of Alappuzha.

Summers are hot and a bit unbearable. Temperatures reach up to 35°C. It is best to avoid the place, which is at its hottest from March to May.

The greens of Alappuzha come alive in the monsoon months of June to October. It can get quite heavy and restrict you to staying indoors. Alappuzha receives an average of up to 250 millimetres every year. The winter months are probably the best time to visit. It is cool and festive towards the end of the year. Temperatures are a maximum of 32°C, and a minimum of 22°C.

Getting Into Alleppey/Alappuzha

Air

The nearest airport is at Kochi. The airport is around 45 minutes from Kochi city, which is 98 km from Alappuzha. From here you will need to make travel arrangements to take a car that will get you to Alappuzha. The distance is around 98 km.

Rail

If you are taking the train to Alappuzha, your best bet is Allappuzha railway station. From here it is 9 km to the boat jetty.

However you can also get here from Ernakulam. It takes two hours to reach Alappuzha on this route. You can also go to Kochi railway station and take a train to Alappuzha; the distance is roughly 68 km.

Boat

Take one of the backwater boat trips to and from Kollam and Kottayam. You can even hire a boat from Kochi to Alappuzha. It takes around 2½ hours. There is no regular service but you can hire a boat after some haggling.

Getting Around Alleppey/Alappuzha

Local rickshaws are available. Negotiate prices and insist on them. Private car rentals are another alternative. They charge by the hour.

Local buses are packed and a pain. The private operators are a sight to behold as they in an many people as possible and then add a few more.

A network of rivers and canals connect places of commercial importance like Kochi, Kottayam and Changanassery. Ferry services operate in almost all the waterlogged areas. The Alappuzha-Changanassery canal that passes through the Kuttanad area connects these two places.

The Wadai and other commercial canals take off from Vembanad Lake and run parallel through the heart of the town. Some of the inland canals are:

Alappuzha-Ambalappuzha

Alappuzha-Changanassery

Alappuzha commercial canal

Alappuzha-Kottayam

Alappuzha-Wadai

Alappuzha-Thalavadi

Alappuzha-West junction

Kakkazhaam-Kayamkulam salt shell

Muhamma-Puchakkal canal

Getting Away Alleppey/Alappuzha

Bus

The KSRTC (Kerala State road transport corporation) bus stand, on the east of town, is served by half-hourly buses to Kollam (3 hours) and Thiruvananthapuram (3 hours, 15 minutes) and to Kochi/ Ernakulam (2 hours); less frequent buses run to Kottayam (4 hours), Thrissur (8 hours) and Palakaad (11 hours).

Boat

Tourist boats travel regularly to Kollam with the ATDC and DTPC boats operating on a similar schedule every alternate day (Monday - Saturday) departing at 10.30 am and arriving at Kollam at 6.30 pm. Regular ferries travel to Kottayam, the first starting at 5 am and the last at 5.30 pm.

Rail

As the backwaters prevent trains from continuing south beyond Alappuzha, only a few major daily services and a handful of passenger trains depart from the train station, 3 km southwest of the jetty. For points further north along the coast including Mangalore, take an early train and change at Ernakulam, as the Alappuzha Cannanore Express 6307 which continues to Kozhikode and Kannur, arrives to those destinations far too late at night. Most trains south to Thiruvananthapuram leaves at inconvenient hours except for the 6341 Erankulam Trivandrum Express.

Time Planner

Day one: Alappuzha beach, Vijaya beach resort, local sightseeing.

Day two: Sri Krishna Temple, Mannarasalas Sree Nagaraja Temple, Latin Catholic Church, Arthunkal (St Andrews Church).

Day three: Krishnampuram Palace, Kottamkulangara Mahavishnu and Devi Temple, Rajarajeshwari Temple.

Day four: Take a local boat cruise.

Day five: Hire a houseboat to visit the Pathiramanal Island.

Sights & Sounds

Kottamkulangara Mahavishnu and Devi Temple

The Mahavishnu is the oldest temple in Alappuzha. It once stood at the centre of a pond which is now filled with sand. These two temples have the distinction of owning two flag masts and two festival seasons. The festival season of the Mahavishnu temple is in January while that of the Devi temple is in March.

Veli - Akkulam

A short distance from the capital city Thiruvananthapuram, is the Veli - Akkulam lagoon with a delightful waterfront park, increasingly popular among both locals and tourists.

Other jump off points are Willingdon Island and Bolghatty Island both of which are situated in Kochi.

Mullackal Rajarajeshwari Temple

Situated in the heart of Alappuzha, this temple is home to Goddess Rajarajeshwari. Known to come alive during the auspicious Navaratri festival, the last two days of this nine-day festival are the most popular. Thousand of devotees watch as nine elephants lead long and colourful processions. A number of cultural festivals like the Ottanthullal are held in the temple premises.

Thaipooyakavadi is another festival celebrated in this temple. During this one-day festival about 15 kabadis take part in a procession that is held in the evening. The kabadi is a decorated headgear carried by certain people. It stands tall, at around 10 feet or more, and is balanced with a wooden base resting on the person's head. Covered in shiny paper, the kabadi makes a pretty sight to see, as it glitters in the night light.

Punnamada Kayal

This is the lake where the Nehru Trophy Boat Races take place every year. Held on the second Saturday of August, these races are the pride of the people who reside here.

Boat races:

You cannot visit the backwaters and not hear about the legendary boat races. In the backwaters the Kali-Vallangal, or the racing boat is king. The most majestic of these is the chundan. The largest of boats measures over 130 feet and can seat over 120 people -- the number of rowers it takes to move one of these giant boats. Sixty rowers are perched on either side of the boat singing vanchi pattu (songs) to the rhythm of the oars.

The head of the boat is shaped like an angry snake, with the hood raised 15-20 feet high. The pointed tip stands four feet above the water, while its brass embellishments shine proudly. The main steersman stands proudly at the head of the boat with a set of specially crafted long oars. Sheer efficiency and a sense of rhythm is what keeps the balance as well as the speed of the boat steady. It is said that one strong plunge of the oar by all of the many rowers can take the boat three leaps forward to a distance of 30 feet.

Serious preparations start before the day of the event. The Chundan Valloms or the "greatest of the racing boats" are slicked down with special oil to help them glide effortlessly. All the rowers then visit a shrine carrying the largest steering oar with them. Prayers are offered before they set out to compete with their fellow men. Among the chief competitors are Champakulam, Cheruthana, Kavalam, Karichal, Jawahar, Thayangari, Pacha, Paippad, Pulincunnu, Kalllooparamban, Nedubhagam and Kandangari. You will hear people calling out to cheer their teams.

The most famous race is the Nehru Trophy Boat Race. Held on the second Saturday of August, it attracts loads of visitors to the region. Other races are held simultaneously. A new addition to the list of boat races is the Great Elephant March held on the 19th of January.

The spirit with which these races are held, coupled with the energy that resounds from not just the oarsmen but even the spectators who gather in large numbers, make this sport unique. The co-ordination, the competition and the unending enthusiasm are unforgettable.

Mannarasals Sree Nagaraja Temple

Dedicated to the king of serpents, this temple is situated near Haripad on the Alappuzha-Kollam route. The temple is a popular pilgrim place, visited by devotees from all over the country. Gold plated serpents stand guard at every corner of the temple's roof.

A two-day festival brings this region alive when chants in praise of the serpent God resound from every corner. On the second day, the royal outing or the Ezhunnallathu is conducted. This is when the temple priests take the idol of Nagaraja around the temple in a procession. Devotees participate by carrying a vessel called the urili, around the temple.

The Latin Catholic Church

This recently renovated church is situated near the Kannan Varkey Bridge. It is one of the oldest buildings of the region and is remarkable in its simplicity. The entrance is flanked by life-size images of the Virgin Mary in her representation as Mother of Perpetual Succour and Christ. A grand image of the Last Supper is situated way above the altar. You are expected to leave your shoes at the entrance.

Pathiramanal Island

Situated in the beautiful Vembanad Lake, getting to the island is only possible by boat from either Kumarakom or Muhamma.

You can hire a boat to take you to the island. A houseboat will take an hour and a half to get there. Motor boats are obviously quicker.

The island does not have a lot to offer except for a ramshackle temple. A solitary path will lead you straight to it.

If you visit during the winter, you might even catch a glimpse of the migratory birds who visit. Try to get a guided tour of the place from the sole inhabitant of the island. He will offer you coconut water and will tell you all about this quiet enclave.

Chettikulangara Bhagavathy Temple

Home to the Bhadrakali deity who is known to possess miraculous powers, the Kettukazhcha festival held here is well attended. Celebrated in the months of February or early March, a large procession of huge chariots carry the epic heroes, the Pandavas, along with horses and bullocks and also depict various scenes from the Puranas.

Alappuzha Beach

Probably the most popular spot in Alappuzha. The pier which extends into the sea is 137 years old and is currently under renovation. An old lighthouse situated here adds a certain mystique to the area. You will find entertainment facilities at the Vijaya Beach Park which is located in close quarters.

Excursions

Krishnapuram Palace

Built during the reign of the Travancore monarch Marthanda Varma, in the early 18th century, this two-storeyed structure of Keralan architecture has dormer windows, gabled roofs and narrow corridors. The palace is also home to one of Kerala's largest mural paintings, the Gajendra Moksham. It measures 14 by 11 feet and is located at the western end of the ground floor close to the palace pool.

The palace also holds an antique museum of sculptures, bronzes and paintings. Relics dating back to the Harappan civilisation are also on display. A well-kept outer garden is home to a human size Buddha built in stone.

Getting here is easy. The palace is 47 km from Alappuzha, en route to Kollam and a bus from either of the two places should get you to the palace.

The palace is open from 9.30 am to 4.30 pm. It is closed on Mondays. Entrance is Rs 2. Photography charge: Rs 5.

Arthunkal

Arthunkal is 22 km from Alappuzha. Portuguese missionaries near Sherthallai set up St Andrews Church here. The feast of St Sebastian is celebrated every January. The old church stands neglected behind the new church building.

Sri Krishna Temple-Ambalapuzha

Fourteen km from Alappuzha, the Sri Krishna Temple prominently depicts the traditional temple architecture that Kerala is known for. It was here that the 16th century poet, Kunjan Nambiar, staged his first Ottan Thullal or solo dance performance. It is here that Palpayasam, or sweet milk porridge is offered to the deity. The temple's main festival occurs in the months of March or early April. This particular one entails a lot walking. Avoid getting here at noon. No footwear is allowed in almost all the temples.

Karumadi

Situated close to Ambalapuzha, is the village of Karunadi. The Karumadi Kuttan, a figure of Buddha built in black granite, which dates back to the 11th century, attracts visitors. The colourful structure that houses the idol makes it stand out a mile. The idol itself is mysteriously half of what it used to be, and legends abound.

Accommodation

Premium

Alappuzha Backwater Resorts

Punchiri Building,
Jetty road.

Pincode: 688011

Tel: 0477-260573

Fax: 0477-252918

Facilities include a massage centre, swimming pool and game room. The hotel offers an evening backwater cruise from 4 - 6.30 pm for Rs 250.

Tariff: Double - Rs 2,580; Single - Rs 1,935

Kayaloram Lake Resort

Alappuzha Backwater Resorts Private Limited,
Near Punnamada Jetty.

Pincode: 688006

Tel: 0477-232040

0477-231573

Fax: 0477-252918

Authentic Keralite cottages built in teakwood, and set in front of the lake, offer the complete Alappuzha experience. Facilities include a massage centre, restaurant, swimming pool and game room. You can ask the manager to arrange a boat cruise or pay for the use of the houseboat for a night. no television or air conditioning but the service is excellent and more than makes up for everything.

Check in/ check out: 12 noon

Credit cards: all major credit cards accepted

Tariff: Rs 2,250 (air-conditioned single room), Rs 3,000 (air-conditioned double room).

The hotel offers a special off-season discount at Rs 2,000 a night inclusive of all three meals.

The Marari Beach Resort

Pincode: 688549

Tel: 0477-863801

Fax: 0477-863810

This is a Casino hotel and the accent here is on luxury, spread over 25 acres. The resort has been built in the style of a traditional fishing village with thatched villas. Rooms are all air-conditioned with twin or double beds, a mini bar, coffee-making facilities, and a veranda with a ceiling fan. The rooms all have an open-air bathroom, and a private garden area.

The most luxurious bets here are the pool villas, which also have a private swimming pool. Other guests can use the huge pool and sun terrace, which is near the main buffet restaurant. There's a beach shack that serves seafood and an ayurveda centre. For the energetic, there's a volleyball court and bicycles on offer. For the lazy, there's beach cots and hammocks.

Check in/ check out: 12 noon

Credit cards: all major credit accepted

Tariff: October 1 to March 31

Rs 6,800 (garden villa, single occupancy), Rs 7,500 (garden villa, double occupancy), Rs 10,000 (private pool villa)

December 21 to January 20

Rs 6,500 (garden villa, single occupancy), Rs 9,200 (garden villa, double occupancy), Rs 13,000 (private pool villa)

Extra person: Rs 1,200.

Tax: 15 per cent luxury tax.

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Mid-Range

Anamika - The Villa

Tel: 0477-242044
Fax: 0477-251810
Tariff: Rs 1,500 onwards.

Coconut Palm

Thottapally.

Coir Village Lake Resort

Tel: 0477-243462
Fax: 0477-241693
Tariff: Rooms for Rs 1,500 onwards.

Government Rest House

Beach.
Tel: 0477-253445

Hotel Bonie

A S road.
Tel: 0477-243752

Hotel Raiban

Near M C Hospital.
Tel: 0477-251930

Keraleeyam Ayurvedic Lake Resort

Heritage Home and Ayurvedic Resort.
Pincode: 688006
Tel: 0477-241468
Fax: 0477-251068

All the rooms in this hotel are fully air-conditioned, heritage style and the cottages are non air-conditioned, ethnic kerala style built with coconut leaves and having water-front sitout. Food tariff for vegetarian/ non-vegetarian food is Rs 705 per person per day (includes breakfast, lunch, evening tea and dinner).

Check in/ check out: 12 noon.

Credit cards: all credit cards are accepted here.

Tariff: Rs 940 (two bedded single occupancy room), Rs 1,175 (two bedded double occupancy room),
Rs 940 (three bedded single occupancy room), Rs 1,175 (three bedded double occupancy room),
Rs 1,410 (three bedded triple occupancy room),

Rs 1,175 (cottage single occupancy), Rs 1,410 (cottage double occupancy)

Extra person (child below 12 years) Rs 235.

All the above room rates is inclusive of all the taxes and room only basis.

Kuttanadu Tourist Home

Near the bus station.
Tel: 0477-251354

PWD Rest House

Tel: 0477-253445
Dormitory with attached bath.

Prince Hotel

A S road.
Pincode: 688007
Tel: 0477-243752
0477-243753
Fax: 0477-243758

Situated 3 km from the main city centre this hotel has a restaurant, bar and swimming pool. There is a television and telephone in every room. Service is acceptable, but the walls of the rooms are very thin!
Check in/ check out: 12 noon
Credit cards: all major credit cards accepted.
Tariff: Rs 1,050 (air-conditioned single room), Rs 1,300 (air-conditioned double room), Rs 1,700/2,500 (suite)

Yatri Niwas

KTDC, Kalappura,
A S road.
Tel: 0477-244460

Facilities include a restaurant, beer bar and TVs in all the air-conditioned rooms.
Tariff: Rs 250 (ordinary room), Rs 400 (ordinary air-conditioned room), Rs 750 (deluxe air-conditioned room)

Budget

Aditya Resort

Tel: 0477-244601
Tariff: Rs 250-350

Allepey Star Hotel

Tel: 0477-244401

Arcadia Resort

Tel: 0477-251354
Tariff: Rs 150 onwards.

Brothers Tourist Home & Restaurant

Near M C H Junction.
Pincode: 688001
Tel: 0477-251653
10 rooms in all. They also have a restaurant.
Tariff: Rs 330 (Deluxe), Rs 148 (Ordinary room).

Cherukara Nest

Tel: 0477-251509
Fax: 0477-243782
Tariff: Rs 550 onwards.

Hotel Komala

Near Zilla Court Bridge,
Thathampally.
Pincode: 688013
Tel: 0477-243631
Fax: 0477-243634
All the basic facilities with a TV in all the air-conditioned rooms.
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Tariff: Rs 500 (single room), Rs 600 (air-conditioned double room), Rs 300(non air-conditioned room).

Kalpakavadi Inn

Tel: 0477-492239

Mutteal Holiday Home

Tel: 0477-242365

Fax: 0477-251961

Tariff: Rs 300 onwards.

Narasimhapuram lodge

Tel: 0477-262662

Padippura Residence

Tel: 0477-244978

Fax: 0477-243150

Tariff: Rs 350 - 650

Palm Grove

Tel: 0477-245004

0477-251138

Tariff: Rs 875

The Green Palace Holiday Resort

Tel: 0477-736262

Fax: 0477-245351

Tariff: Rs 475 onwards.

Eating Out

Coconut water is available almost everywhere. A thirst quencher and a sure adrenaline boost. Rs 13 for the coconut water with malai and Rs 10 for only water.

Banana chips are freshly fried and possibly the best thing to snack on. From pepper flavoured to the good old plain salted, there is a variety to choose from.

Restaurants

Annapurna

Near Medical College

Tel: 0477-251930

Fax: 0477-251931

This is an 'only vegetarian' restaurant.

Riaban

Near Medical College Hospital

Pin: 688001

Tel: 0477-251930

Fax: 0477-251931

While this restaurant might not serve your standard idli and dosa, other South Indian dishes are on the menu.

Shopping

The bazaar along the main street, at Mullakal road is where you will see mundu-clad men selling local groceries.

You might want to take some of the ancient hand-crafted coir mats, yarns and mattings home. Take a look at the locally made carpets which are also worth a buy.

Useful Information

Banks/Money Changers

Bank of India On Mullakal road

Canara Bank Next to the Zion Food Shop, Near the jetty. This bank accepts travellers' cheques but not cash.

State Bank of India On Beach road

Tourist Offices

The ATDC and the DTPC are both co-operative societies that sell tickets for ferries, backwater cruises and charter boats for a maximum of 20 people.

Tourist Offices

A short walk across the canal from the jetty on Komala road

Open daily from 8 am - 8 pm.

Tel: 0477-2433462

District Tourism Promotion Council

At the DTPC boat jetty

They even take charge of hotel bookings for all KTDC and private hotels throughout Kerala and other parts of South India. The office is open daily from 8.30 am - 6.30 pm. All days, inclusive of Sundays.

Tel: 0477- 251796

Government of Kerala Tourist Office

At the DTPC Jetty

Tel: 0477-260722

Kerala Backwaters (Tourist Office)

At the Choondapally Buildings, Near the Nehru Trophy end point

Tel: 0477-241693

Survival Guide

Do not underestimate the heat of the sun. Carry sun block and a hat to protect your skin. Frequent power cuts will be something you will have to live with. Carry a torch, candles and matchboxes. The stench that sometimes emanates from the canals is not going to be easy to ignore. Carry scented tissues.

Shops are closed for a week during Onam. While basic facilities will be available, most tourist spots will be shut.

English might help if you're lucky, but not Hindi. Arm yourself with a phrase book. Your pronunciations might be wrong but you will at least get somewhere.