



Kerala

Serene Kerala is a state shaped by its wonderful natural landscape: a long, luxurious coastline; wandering backwaters; lush palms and spice plantations; and cool mountain escapes. Add the kaleidoscope of culture best seen in the unique performing arts and you'll understand why Kerala is an experience not to be missed.

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Above Backwater canals near Kumarakom (p294)



Beaches

Goa might pull in the package-holiday crowds, but Kerala's coastline – almost 600km of it – boasts a stunning string of golden-sand beaches, fringed by palms and washed by the Arabian Sea. The southern beaches are the busiest, while less-discovered, wilder choices await in the north.

Southern Beaches

Most established of the resorts along the coast is Kovalam, only a short hop from the capital, Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum). Once a quiet fishing village, Kovalam has two sheltered crescents of beach perfect for paddling that are now overlooked by a town that's almost entirely made up of hotels. If you're looking for something less built up: south of here are some lovely beaches and resorts, clustered

in the area around Pulinkudi and Chowara, where ayurvedic treatments are popular.

Further north is Varkala, which straggles along its dramatic, streaked russet-and-gold cliffs. Although a holy town popular with Hindu pilgrims, Varkala has also developed into Kerala's backpacker bolthole and the cliffs are lined with guesthouses, open-front restaurants and bars all moving to a reggae, rock and trance soundtrack. For a quieter scene, travellers are drifting north to Odayam and Kappil beaches.

Even further north, Alappuzha (Alleppey) is best known for its backwaters, but also has a decent beach, while Kochi (Cochin) has Cherai Beach on Vypeen Island, a lovely stretch of white sand, with miles of lazy lagoons and backwaters only a few hundred metres from the seafloor.