

Destination South India

Like a giant wedge plunging into the Indian Ocean, peninsular South India is the steamy Hindu heartland of the subcontinent, and an infinitely different place from the landlocked mountains and sun-baked deserts of the north.

Thousands of kilometres of coastline frame fertile plains and curvaceous hills, all kept deliciously lush by the double-barrelled monsoon. This is the India for those seeking the happy-go-lucky beach life of Goa; the ancient Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka; the upbeat urban jungles of Mumbai (Bombay) and Bengaluru (Bangalore); the breezy palm-fringed backwaters of tropical Kerala; the dramatic trekking and wildlife-watching opportunities of the hills and plains; and the unfettered rural and tribal culture of Andhra Pradesh.

When it comes to ethnic groups, festivals, landscapes and traditions, South India is spectacularly diverse, presenting the traveller with a scintillating smorgasbord of things to see and do. And then of course there's the food, from traditional favourites such as podgy *idlis* (rice cakes) and crisp dosas (savoury creeps) to a gamut of global fare – from sushi to nachos – found in the south's bigger cities and tourist centres.

Once you touch down on subcontinental soil, you'll quickly discover that cricket – India's sporting obsession – is one of the most spirited topics of conversation, along with the latest shenanigans in the razzle-dazzle world of Bollywood. However, it is politics – whether at the national, state or village level – that consistently dominates news headlines, with middle- and upper-class India also keenly keeping their fingers on the pulse of international events. Indeed much of the current-affairs talk on the streets of South India mirrors that up north, with political directives made in Delhi percolating down south. Economic matters frequently feature high on regional and national political agendas. With one of the world's fastest-growing economies, India has certainly made colossal strides over the past decade. However, despite averaging an annual growth rate of around 9% in recent years, vast sections of the country's billion-plus population have seen little benefit from the economic boom. Indeed the government's ongoing challenge is to spread both the burden and bounty of India's fiscal prosperity. Not an easy task given that the gap between the haves and the have-nots is far from shrinking, and poverty (see p49) is set to spiral upwards if India's population rate continues to gallop beyond that of its economic growth.

For decades, overpopulation (see p50) has been at the core of many of the country's most pressing problems. Apart from the pressure that an expanding population is placing on India's already groaning infrastructure, analysts warn that it's just a matter of time before the mounting competition for resources ignites interminable communal conflict – not to mention bringing to cracking point an already overstretched healthcare system. Analysts also predict that as the population continues to climb, so too will the number of children from low-income households who drop-out of school in order to scrape together whatever they can to supplement meagre family earnings (see p46).

When it comes to the environment, climate change, deforestation, pollution, tourism-related development (especially in Goa; see the boxed text, p194) and ever-expanding industrialisation are just some of the key issues that both the central and South Indian state governments are grappling with – for further details, see p95.

The political challenges for India's government are no less daunting, especially in relation to ongoing communal friction, with the most incen-

NATIONWIDE FAST FACTS

Population: 1.027 billion
(2001 census)

Unemployment rate:
7.2% (2008)

Average annual income:
US\$977

Population growth rate:
1.6%

Literacy rate: 65.38%
(2001 census)

Families living in one-
room homes: 42%

India's percentage of
world population: 16.9%

Average cost of a big-city
wedding: US\$12,500

Life expectancy: 66 years
(women) and 63 years
(men)

Proportion of females to
males: 933:1000 (2001
census)

sant case being that between India and Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir. Unresolved since the subcontinent's partition in 1947, the Kashmir impasse has been the catalyst for intensely rocky relations between the two countries ever since. While recent years have seen promising dialogue between Delhi and Islamabad, the November 2008 commando-style terrorist attacks in Mumbai swiftly saw hope turn to suspicion – see p40.

On a more optimistic note, South India has been going from strength to strength in terms of its IT industry, with southern cities such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad and Chennai attracting great international interest. The south's burgeoning IT industry has played a vital role in revolutionising India's once-ramshackle economy, with analysts forecasting an even rosier future in spite of the global economic slump (see the boxed text 'A Software Superpower', p50).

Meanwhile, on the tourism front, the good news for South India is that recent years have seen an upswing in the number of foreign tourists, which not only translates to a boost in revenue for southern state coffers, but also in increased employment and benefits to associated enterprises (particularly cottage industries), as well as preservation of cultural traditions such as dance and music. Government data indicates that India's foreign tourist arrivals in 2008 was 5.37 million – a 5.7% jump from the preceding year. One of the most lucrative growth sectors for South India is that of medical tourism (travel to India for competitively priced medical treatment), which has projected earnings of a staggering US\$2 billion by 2012 (also read the box 'Medical Tourism – Would you like a transplant with that?' on p341). Wellness spas – which include post-operative Ayurvedic treatments and other internationally fashionable Indian therapies – are set to mushroom in southern centres, especially Kerala and Goa, as the medical tourism sector swells.

South India offers a delightfully mellow pace of travel, with most of its sites easily accessible and the beach never too far away. No matter where your wanderings take you, you'll soon discover that India is an invigorating assault on *all* the senses, an experience that's impossible to define because it's so incredibly different for everyone. Ultimately, it's all about taking a leap of faith and surrendering to the unknown: this is the India that nothing can ever prepare you for because its very essence – its elusive soul – lies cradled in its mystery.

Getting Started

Vibrant, inspiring, mystifying, confronting, thought-provoking and frustrating in equal measure, there's no doubt that India presents the traveller with a mind-bending array of experiences. But toss aside any stereotypes you may harbour, because the South is India's 'gentler' side, with far fewer touts and scam artists than the North, and plenty of blissful beaches to flee to whenever you need some sunny seaside therapy. If you haven't visited this part of the world before, set aside the first few days to simply acclimatise to the subcontinent's bamboozling symphony of sights, sounds, tastes and smells.

As South India spans a large area and has a wealth of natural and historic attractions, deciding where to go is likely to be one of your greatest challenges (for ideas, see *Itineraries*, p21). The key is to try not to squeeze in too much, as travelling often involves considerable distances and stamina. Remember to allow a few weeks of pre-trip preparation to sort out your visa and immunisations. Before arriving, devise a rough itinerary – you don't want to miss that spectacular festival by three days or plan to be relaxing on a Goan beach during the sweltering summer or soggy monsoon – but also factor in a certain amount of flexibility, as things don't always run like clockwork in India. Indeed, more than a few travellers have had their holidays marred by not being able to get their preferred train seats, or being delayed by rescheduled buses and the like. Another reason to introduce flexibility into your itinerary is because India has an uncanny way of presenting unexpected surprises and guiding you off the beaten track.

Finally, read up on India as much as you can prior to your trip, especially its cultural framework (also see *The Culture*, p44). Doing so will enhance

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting a visa (p513) and travel insurance (p501)
- Seeking advice about vaccinations (p535) and taking adequate stocks of prescription medication
- Nonrevealing clothes (women *and* men) – covering up will win you more respect and is essential when visiting sacred sites
- A well-concealed money belt (p498)
- Sunscreen lotion and sunglasses
- A small torch (flashlight) for poorly lit streets and power cuts
- Good-quality earplugs to block out night din and for long bus/train trips
- Flip-flops (thongs) for shared or grotty bathrooms
- A shower cap and universal sink plug (uncommon except at top-end hotels)
- Tampons – sanitary pads are widely available but tampons are usually restricted to big (or touristy) cities
- Mosquito repellent (a mosquito net can also come in handy)
- A water bottle – if you use water-purification tablets or filters you'll help in the anti-plastic crusade (see p540 for more information on drinking water)
- Sleeping-bag sheet – if you're unsure about hotel linen (especially at budget places) and for overnight train journeys
- Expecting the unexpected – India loves to toss up surprises

MONSOON

Kerala is the first place the southwest monsoon strikes, around early June, drenching the state as it sweeps in eastward from the Arabian Sea. As it rises over the Western Ghats, it cools and soaks the windward slopes before dropping over the leeward side, parts of which receive only about a quarter of the rainfall dumped on the windward side. Within about 10 days the monsoon has usually travelled as far as northern Maharashtra, and by early July it has covered most of the country. Karnataka's Western Ghats are among the wettest parts of South India.

A second soaking occurs in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in November and early December when the retreating monsoon (commonly referred to as the northeast or winter monsoon) blusters in from the Bay of Bengal. The coasts of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are occasionally hit by cyclones during these months.

your appreciation of the subcontinent's sights and traditions and will better equip you to hold more informed conversations with locals.

WHEN TO GO

Except in the elevated hills of the Western Ghats, South India is hot year-round and can be roughly divided into two main seasons – dry and wet (monsoon). There are two monsoon periods – the northeast and southwest monsoons – with dates varying slightly across the region. As the climate is tropical, you won't find the large variations in temperature found in northern India.

In general, late October to early March is the best time to visit South India. It's relatively dry and cool, although in November and the beginning of December parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala get a drenching as the northeast monsoon retreats across them. In the beach resorts of Goa, some facilities (such as beach shacks) don't open until late October or November and, in the weeks immediately after the monsoon (ie in October), there may be strong rips, which can make swimming hazardous. Accommodation prices in popular tourist places, such as Goa, Kerala and the offshore islands, peak around Christmas and New Year.

Temperatures start to rise rapidly in most places in late March, and by May South India sizzles. The peak travel season in the mountains is April to June, where the altitude provides cool relief from the scorching plains. Conversely, the Western Ghats can get misty and quite cold in winter (late December and January), and the nights are often cold regardless of the time of year.

The climate in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is tropical, with temperatures averaging 29°C, but this is moderated by sea breezes. The islands receive most rain during the southwest monsoon (May to September), and during the cyclonic storms in October and November. Lakshadweep has similar tropical weather.

Apart from the weather, the timing of certain festivals or special events may also influence when you wish to visit (see p19 and the 'Festivals In...' boxes in regional chapters).

COSTS & MONEY

South India pleases all pockets. Accommodation ranges from flimsy beachside shacks to swanky five-star hotels, with some charming midrange possibilities that won't break the bank. A multi-priced array of restaurants means you can eat to your heart's content without spending a fortune, and it's also possible to zip around economically thanks to a comprehensive public transport network.

As costs vary throughout South India, the best way of ascertaining how much money you'll need for your trip is to peruse the relevant regional chapters of this book. Be prepared to pay more in the larger cities such as

See Climate Charts (p496) for more climate information.

Mumbai (Bombay) and Bengaluru (Bangalore), as well as at popular tourist destinations during peak season.

In regard to sightseeing, foreigners are often charged more than Indian citizens for entry into tourist sites (admission prices for foreigners are sometimes given in US dollars, payable in the rupee equivalent), and there may also be additional charges for still/video cameras.

Accommodation is likely to be your biggest expense (see p491). Costs can vary depending on the season – high-season prices for hotels can be 50% (even higher) more, but usually only at popular tourist spots – and depend on whether you're travelling solo or with a group. High season is from around November to February in most regions, with a specific peak season of mid-December to early January in coastal resorts. High season in the mountains (such as at hill stations) is from around April to June. Accommodation rates can shoot up during festivals or other special events (see p494 for details). Given the vast differences across South India, it's misleading for us to pinpoint a definitive average accommodation price – see p493 for more information, as well as the regional chapters Sleeping sections. If you've got cash to splash, some of South India's top-end hotels are among the world's finest, but be prepared to fork out *at least* US\$200 per night at the better properties before even getting a whiff of room service. Surf the web for possible internet discounts.

Dining out is, overall, top value, with budget restaurant meals for as little as Rs40 (even less at the more basic street eateries), and usually from around double that for a satiating midrange restaurant meal. At the more suave urban restaurants, main dishes generally hover between Rs150 and Rs350, to which you'll need to add the cost of side dishes, such as rice, and (usually) a tax of 10% to 12.5%. As with accommodation, meal prices vary regionally (for details see the Eating sections of individual chapters).

Regarding long-distance travel, there's a range of classes on trains and several bus types, resulting in considerable flexibility vis-à-vis comfort and price – regional chapters supply specific costs; also see p523. Domestic flights have become a lot more price competitive over recent years thanks to deregulation and good internet deals (see p523). Within towns there's economical public transport (see p526), or you may like to consider hiring a car with driver, which is surprisingly good value if there are several of you to split the cost (see p525).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Sacred Games, by Vikram Chandra, is a skilfully crafted and gripping thriller that takes the reader on an exhilarating journey through modern-day Mumbai's seedy underworld and beyond.

William Sutcliffe's *Are You Experienced?* is the humorous tale of first-time backpacker Dave, who accompanies his best friend's girlfriend to India in an attempt to seduce her.

HOW MUCH?

Sarong: from Rs75

Toothpaste (100g): Rs28

One dozen bananas: Rs25

Bellybutton bindi: from Rs15

Sandalwood incense (15 sticks): from Rs20

SCINTILLATING SOUTH INDIA

South India has far more to offer than simply sightseeing:

- Activities that span blood-pumping walks to mind-soothing meditation (see p100)
- Courses, from classical dance to specialised yoga (see p495)
- Festivals that range from the wildly upbeat to the spiritually serene (see p19)
- Shopping, shopping and more shopping! (see p506)
- Volunteering, whether it's teaching at schools or caring for injured animals (see p514)

TOP PICKS

Arabian
Sea

SOUTH
INDIA

Bay of
Bengal

Andaman
& Nicobar

RIVETING READS

There's no dearth of novels offering brilliant insights into India – the titles below are just a tiny selection of our favourites. For additional recommended reading, see opposite, p60 and the boxed text on p114.

- *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga
- *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai
- *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts
- *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy
- *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie

FANTASTICAL FESTIVALS

South India has a glorious mix of big and small festivals – for comprehensive details see p19 and the 'Festivals In...' boxed texts in regional chapters. The following is just a drop in the vast festival ocean.

- Nehru Trophy Snake Boat Race – August; Kerala (p323)
- Ganesh Chaturthi – August/September; especially in Mumbai (Bombay; p108) and Pune (p146)
- Diwali – October/November; nationwide (p20)
- Feast of St Francis Xavier – December; Old Goa (p189)
- Festival of Carnatic Music & Dance – December/January; Chennai (Madras; p389)

TEMPTING TRIPS

With South India's diverse range of dramatic landscapes and waterways, the memories you'll gather on the road will blaze bright in your mind long after your Indian sojourn wraps up. Here are some particularly unforgettable trips.

- Toy train to Ooty (Udhagamandalam; p470) – the miniature steam train to Ooty chugs past some truly jaw-dropping mountain scenery
- Backwater cruise from Alappuzha (Alleppey) to Kollam (Quilon); see 'The Backwaters boxed' text (p346) – cruising the lush Kerala backwaters is undeniably one of the star attractions of a trip to South India
- Mumbai to Goa by train (p141) – travel down the picturesque Konkan Coast on one of India's newest stretches of rail line
- Island-hopping in the Andamans (p479) – kick back on the ferry deck and hop from one sun-kissed island to another in the tropical Andamans
- Cycling in Goa – enjoy an unhurried bike ride from chirpy Panaji (Panjim; p191) to atmospheric Old Goa (p198)

Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found, by Suketu Mehta, is an incisively researched and elegantly written epic, equal parts memoir, travelogue and journalism, which focuses on Mumbai – gang warfare, riots, Bollywood, bar girls and more.

Chasing the Monsoon, by Alexander Frater, is an Englishman's story of his monsoon-chasing journey from Kovalam (Kerala) to Meghalaya (in the

northeast states). It perceptively captures the significance of the monsoon both on the land and for the people.

Christopher Kremmer's *Inhaling the Mahatma* reveals the Australian author's multifarious encounters with India – that include a hijacking, riots, and falling in love – during and beyond his stint as a Delhi-based foreign correspondent in the early 1990s.

Geoffrey Moorhouse's *Om: An Indian Pilgrimage* provides an erudite window into the lives of a diverse group of people in South India, from coir makers to holy men.

Indian Summer, by Will Randall, is the author's personal experience of unexpectedly finding himself in Pune teaching at a school for street kids, then suddenly fighting to save the school from being shut down.

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is the tale of two young Europeans, Matteo and Sophie, who go to India seeking spiritual enlightenment. While Matteo's ashram experience is spiritually affirming, Sophie's isn't quite so rosy.

In *Divining the Deccan*, Bill Aitken rides through the little-visited centre of South India on a motorbike, painting a lively portrait of the region and including some enlightening historical and cultural details.

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, by Kiran Desai, follows a bored post-office clerk and dreamer who retreats to the branches of a secluded guava tree in search of the contemplative life, only to be pursued by crowds of people seeking enlightenment.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Events in India (www.eventsinindia.com) A handy site covering current happenings in major Indian cities.

Incredible India (www.incredibleindia.org) The official Indian government tourism site.

IndiaMike (www.indiamike.com) A popular forum that is a great place to tap into India's traveller grapevine.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Useful links, including the popular Thorn Tree travel forum, where you can swap information with fellow travellers to South India and beyond.

South India (www.southindia.com) A South India-specific portal with links to everything from hospitals to state tourist sites.

South India Tourism (www.south-india-tourism.com) Proffers information about various facets of the South Indian tourism scene, from festivals and Ayurveda to temples and beaches.

World Newspapers (www.world-newspapers.com/india.html) Provides links to India's major English-language national and regional publications, enabling you to stay tuned to what's happening where.

Events Calendar

Most festivals in India follow the Indian or Tibetan lunar calendars, tied to the moon's cycle, or the (changeable) Islamic calendar. Consequently, exact dates vary from year to year (consult tourist offices). Those listed here represent major national festivals, arranged according to the Indian lunar calendar; for details of regional festivals, see the regional chapters 'Festivals in...' boxed texts.

CHAITRA (MARCH/APRIL)

MAHAVIR JAYANTI

Jain festival commemorating the birth of Mahavir, the founder of Jainism.

RAMANAVAMI

Hindus celebrate the birth of Rama with processions, music and feasting, and readings and enactments of scenes from the Ramayana.

EASTER

Christian holiday marking the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

VAISAKHA (APRIL/MAY)

BUDDHA JAYANTI

Celebrating Buddha's birth, enlightenment and attainment of nirvana (final release from the cycle of existence); this festival can fall in April, May or early June.

JYAISTHA (MAY/JUNE)

Only regional festivals currently fall in this period; see the regional chapters 'Festivals in...' boxed texts.

ASADHA (JUNE/JULY)

RATH YATRA (CAR FESTIVAL)

Effigies of Lord Jagannath (Vishnu as lord of the world) are hauled through cities on man-powered chariots, most famously in Puri (Orissa).

SRAVANA (JULY/AUGUST)

NAAG PANCHAMI

Hindu festival dedicated to Ananta, the serpent upon whose coils Vishnu rested between uni-

verses. Snakes are venerated as totems against monsoon flooding and other evils.

RAKSHA BANDHAN (NARIAL PURNIMA)

On the full moon, girls fix amulets known as *rakhis* to the wrists of brothers and close male friends to protect them in the coming year. Brothers reciprocate with gifts. Some people also worship the Vedic sea god Varuna.

RAMADAN (RAMAZAN)

Thirty days of dawn-to-dusk fasting mark the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. It falls around 12 August 2010, 1 August 2011 and 20 July 2012.

BHADRA (AUGUST/SEPTEMBER)

INDEPENDENCE DAY

15 Aug

This public holiday marks the anniversary of India's Independence (from Britain) in 1947. Celebrations are a countrywide expression of patriotism.

DRUKPA TESHI

A Buddhist festival celebrating the first teaching given by Siddhartha Gautama.

GANESH CHATURTHI

Hindus celebrate the birth of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, with verve, particularly in Mumbai (see p108). Clay idols of Ganesh are paraded through the streets before being ceremonially immersed in rivers, tanks (reservoirs) or the sea.

JANMASTAMI

Hindus celebrate Krishna's birthday, particularly at his birthplace, Mathura (Uttar Pradesh).

SHRAVAN PURNIMA

On this day of fasting, high-caste Hindus replace the sacred thread looped over their left shoulder.

PATETI

Parsis celebrate the Zoroastrian new year at this time, especially in Mumbai.

ASVINA (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER)**NAVRATRI**

This Hindu 'Festival of Nine Nights' leading up to Dussehra celebrates the goddess Durga in all her incarnations. Special folk dances are held, and the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati also receive special praise. Festivities are particularly vibrant in Gujarat and Maharashtra.

DUSSEHRA

A Vaishnavite festival, celebrating the victory of the Hindu god Rama over the demon-king Ravana and the triumph of good over evil. Dussehra is especially big in Mysore (see the boxed text, p252), where effigies of Ravana and his cohorts are ritually burned.

DURGA PUJA

The conquest of good over evil, with the goddess Durga's victory over buffalo-headed demon Mahishasura. Celebrations occur around Dussehra.

GANDHI JAYANTI

2 Oct

This public holiday is a solemn celebration of Mohandas Gandhi's birth, with prayer meetings at Gandhi's cremation site (Raj Ghat) in Delhi.

EID AL-FITR

Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan with three days of festivities, starting 30 days after the start of the fast.

KARTIKA (OCTOBER/NOVEMBER)**DIWALI (DEEPAVAALI)**

On the 15th day of Kartika, Hindus joyfully celebrate the 'festival of lights' for five days, giving gifts, lighting fireworks, and burning butter and oil lamps to lead Lord Rama home from exile.

GOVARDHANA PUJA

A Vaishnavite Hindu festival commemorating the lifting of Govardhan Hill by Krishna; celebrated by Krishna devotees around India.

EID AL-ADHA

Muslims commemorate Ibrahim's readiness to sacrifice his son to God. It falls around 16 November 2010, 6 November 2011 and 26 October 2012.

AGHAN (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER)**NANAK JAYANTI**

The birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is celebrated with prayer readings and processions.

MUHARRAM

Shi'ia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Imam. It falls around 7 December 2010, 26 November 2011 and 15 November 2012.

PAUSA (DECEMBER/JANUARY)**CHRISTMAS DAY**

25 Dec

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

MAGHA (JANUARY/FEBRUARY)**REPUBLIC DAY**

26 Jan

This public holiday commemorates the founding of the Republic of India in 1950; the most spectacular celebrations are in Delhi, which holds a huge military parade along Rajpath and the Beating of the Retreat three days later.

PONGAL

A Tamil festival marking the end of the harvest season. Families in the south prepare pots of *pongal* (a mixture of rice, sugar, dhal and milk), symbolic of prosperity and abundance, then feed them to decorated and adorned cows.

VASANT PANCHAMI

Honouring Saraswati, the goddess of learning, Hindus dress in yellow and place books, musical instruments and other educational objects in front of idols of the goddess to receive her blessing.

LOSAR

Tibetan New Year – celebrated by tantric Buddhists all over India, particularly in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Ladakh and Zaskar. Dates can vary from region to region.

PHALGUNA (FEBRUARY/MARCH)**EID-MILAD-UN-NABI**

Islamic festival celebrating the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. It falls around 26 February 2010, 15 February 2011 and 4 February 2012.

HOLI

One of India's most ecstatic festivals; Hindus celebrate the beginning of spring by throwing coloured water and *gulal* (powder) at anyone within range. On the night before Holi, bonfires symbolise the demise of the evil demon Holika.

SHIVARATRI

This day of Hindu fasting recalls the *tandava* (cosmic victory dance) of Lord Shiva. Temple processions are followed by the chanting of mantras and anointing of linga (phallic images of Shiva).

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SOUTH INDIA EXPRESS

Three to Eight Weeks/Mumbai to Chennai

Start in **Mumbai** (Bombay; p107), then head northeast to **Aurangabad** (p152) to visit the amazing rock-cut caves at **Ellora** (p157) and **Ajanta** (p160). Next, scuttle south to **Pune** (p173) to meditate and play 'zennis' (Zen tennis). It's a long but easy trip to **Bijapur** (p286), with the Golgumbaz (p287), then south to the former Vijayanagar capital of **Hampi** (p275). Continue on to **Bengaluru** (Bangalore; p236), India's IT powerhouse, detouring to the pilgrimage centre of **Sravanabelagola** (p261), and the temples of **Halebid** (p260) and **Belur** (p260). Next stop is the erstwhile maharaja's capital of **Mysore** (p249) and, for a change of pace, slide down the Western Ghats to **Ooty** (Udhagamandalam; p464), with a stop at **Mudumalai National Park** (p470). Take the toy train to Mettupalayam and west to **Kochi** (Cochin; p360). From here you can travel to the **Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary** (p352) to gawk at wild animals. It's a comfortable trip from here to **Madurai** (p445) and its remarkable Sri Meenakshi Temple. After soaking up Madurai's tremendous temples, hop on a train to **Chennai** (Madras; p391).

From Mumbai to Chennai, this route includes some of the best of South India's city life and temple towns, as well as trekking and wildlife. Three weeks will cover the main stops, but add a few more weeks to tackle the 3500km.



SAVOURING THE SOUTH

Two Months/Mumbai to Hyderabad

Mumbai (p107), the rambunctious capital of Maharashtra, is a splendid jumping-off point for exploration of India's steamy south. Make sure you time your trip to avoid the sticky monsoon – the sunniest skies are from around October to February. Don't forget to pack plenty of sunscreen!

Kick off in cosmopolitan Mumbai, the beating heart of star-studded Bollywood (p120), making the most of the fabulous shopping (p138), eating (p131) and drinking (p135) before heading northeast to **Ajanta** (p160) and **Ellora** (p157) to marvel at Maharashtra's finest cave art. Sashay southwest to **Goa** (p185) to simply flop on the soft sand and splash in the cool ocean at one of the state's palm-fringed beaches before dosing up on history inland at enigmatic **Hampi** (p275), with its temple ruins and giant boulders.

Next, hang out with yuppies at the hip party bars of **Bengaluru** (p245), then get giddy on the waft of incense in spicy **Mysore** (p249) with its opulent Maharaja's Palace (p250). Tuck into a wholesome banana-leaf thali (p255), before cruising south to tropical Kerala, stopping at historical **Kochi** (Cochin; p360) to enjoy a traditional performance of Kathakali (p371). Cruise Kerala's languorous backwaters from **Alappuzha** (Alleppey; p343), before dipping your toes in the warm waters around **Varkala** (p336).

For a change of tempo, go northeast from Varkala to **Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary** (p352) to spot wild elephants before boggling at the awe-inspiring temples of **Madurai** (p445). Pop into **Trichy** (Tiruchirappalli; p438) and **Thanjavur** (Tanjore; p434) before slowing down in French-flavoured **Puducherry** (Pondicherry; p420), a cheerful coastal town where you can toss up between curries or crepes. Feast on more fine food in Tamil Nadu's chaotic capital, **Chennai** (p401), then flee north to admire intriguing Mughal-era relics in **Hyderabad** (p295).

A slice of the steamy south, this itinerary visits blissful beaches, intriguing cave temples, lush jungle reserves, a maharaja's palace and some of South India's most scintillating cities. Add on a couple of weeks if you prefer to savour the experience more slowly.



SAND, SEA & SACRED SITES **Two to Three Months/Mumbai to Chennai**

This itinerary, beginning in **Mumbai** (p107) and ending in **Chennai** (p391), blends some of the south's most sublime temples with its most breathtaking beaches. If you're keen to beach it up to the max, consider tagging the sun-washed **Andaman Islands** (p472) onto the end of this itinerary.

Start at Mumbai's Chowpatty Beach (p119), overlooking the vast Arabian Sea, with a plate of delicious *bhelpuri* (p85). Take a cruise to the magnificent rock-cut temples on **Elephanta Island** (p143), then travel south by train to beach-blessed **Goa** (p185). Whether you're seeking something mellow or something party-charged, this beach-bursting state has something to suit everyone; old favourites include Arambol (Harmal; p220), Vagator (p217) and around Palolem (p229). Continue to the sacred seaside town of **Gokarna** (p272), with its more hushed appeal than touristy Goa. Next, veer inland to the ruined Vijayanagar temples at **Hampi** (p275), with its peculiar boulder-strewn landscape, and the Hoysala temples of **Belur and Halebid** (p260).

Connect through the coastal towns of **Mangalore** (p267) and **Kochi** (Cochin; p360) to Kerala's palm-packed seaside strip and indulge in some serious beach therapy in **Varkala** (p336) and **Kovalam** (p331), before taking the train northeast to the awesome Sri Meenakshi Temple in **Madurai** (p446). Continue north through the historic temple towns of **Trichy** (p438), **Thanjavur** (p434) and **Chidambaram** (p428), breaking the journey at pretty **Puducherry** (p420) where you can pick up lovely handmade paper (p427) for friends back home.

Continuing north, detour inland to the captivating **Arunachaleswar Temple** (p418) in Tiruvannamalai, and follow the coast to carving-covered **Mamallapuram** (Mahabalipuram; p407), home to the ancient Shore Temple (p408). Conclude your southern sojourn with a stroll along Chennai's **Marina Beach** (p397).

Kicking off in Mumbai and winding up in Chennai, this route brings together the best of South India's beaches and temples – you'll feel chilled out and spiritually charged at the same time! Treat yourself to an additional month to really squeeze the most out of this trip.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

HILL HAPPY

Three to Six Weeks/Mumbai to Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary

A great way to avoid the tourist treadmill is to ditch the coastal towns and go trekking in the beautiful national parks and hills of the Western Ghats.

From Mumbai take the toy train up to **Matheran** (p168), an appealing hill-top retreat with tranquil walks and panoramic lookouts. Head back down via Lonavla and Pune before winding your way back up into the hills to **Mahabaleshwar** (p180), a hill station popular with families and famous for its berry farms. From here it's a bit of a trek south to **Madikeri** (Mercara; p263) in the Kodagu (Coorg) hills, but worth it for the rewarding trekking and fragrant coffee plantations. Journey east to Mysore, and head back up into the hills again. Four adjoining national parks – **Mudumalai National Park** (p470) in Tamil Nadu, **Bandipur National Park** (p262) and **Nagarhole National Park** (p262) in Karnataka and **Wayanad National Park** (p380) in Kerala – form the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and together they offer some of the most phenomenal wildlife viewing, trekking and jungle camps in South India. From Mudumalai it's an enjoyable trip to **Ooty** (p464), a sprawling Raj-era hill station set amid forested hills. If you still haven't had your fill of hiking and hill stations, head south from Coimbatore through the Palani Hills to **Kodaikanal** (Kodai; p456), a quainter and quieter town than Ooty. From Kodaikanal you can take a Kochi-bound bus to **Munnar** (p355), which boasts the world's highest tea plantations as well as dramatic mountain scenery. Another 70km south of here is the **Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary** (p352), a marvellous place for wildlife watching, jungle treks and lake cruises.

Verdant national parks, pretty forests and cool hill stations make a welcome change from the coast and plains.

This 1500km route whisks you through impressive hill stations and wildlife-watching areas. You could wrap the trip up in just three weeks, but an extra week will give you more breathing space.



THE WORLD HERITAGE WHIRL **Four to Six Weeks/Mumbai to Thanjavur**

India has close to 30 World Heritage Sites, with those in the south mostly being ancient monuments or temples.

In Mumbai, one of the newest additions to the list is the **Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus** (p117) – better known as Victoria Terminus – the main train station, and its riotous blend of Gothic architecture makes this one of the most original train stations on the planet. **Elephanta Island** (p143), just out of Mumbai, sports rock-cut cave temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. The finest historical attractions in Maharashtra are undeniably the rock-cut cave temples at **Ellora** (p157), which were created over a period of five centuries by Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monks, and the caves and Buddhist frescoes at **Ajanta** (p160), which predate those of Ellora.

Meanwhile, the churches and convents of Goa's former capital, **Old Goa** (p198) are among India's most striking and should not be missed. They include the Basilica of Bom Jesus (p199), Sé Cathedral (Sé de Santa Catarina; p199) and the Church of St Francis of Assisi (p199). **Hampi** (p275) is a favourite as much for its atmosphere as for its eye-catching temples harking back to the Vijayanagar empire. Just north, the temples of **Pattadakal** (p286) may be less well known, but the Virupaksha Temple, with its beautifully carved columns depicting scenes from the great Hindu epics, is still worth a peek. At **Mamallapuram** (p407), the Shore Temple (p408) and Five Rathas (p408) are among a large group of monuments from the Pallava dynasty, while at **Thanjavur** (p434), the Brihadishwara Temple (p434) is the crowning glory.

India's southern World Heritage Sites include exquisite rock-cut caves, atmospheric churches, ancient temples and even a city railway station. You could manage the trip in a month, but a couple of extra weeks will make the experience more rewarding.



ISLAND MAGIC

Two to Four Weeks

If you're hankering for near-deserted beaches, snorkelling and diving, the Andamans are hard to beat. The island chain, 1000km east of the mainland in the Bay of Bengal, can be reached by boat or air from Chennai or Kolkata (Calcutta). From Chennai, you'll arrive by air or sea into the capital, **Port Blair** (p480), a busy town with little tropical allure but some commendable museums and legacies of the island's colonial past. After a visit to Port Blair's Cellular Jail National Memorial (p480) and **Ross Island** (p485), book a ferry to **Havelock Island** (p486), where you can indulge in scuba diving, snorkelling and fishing. For something quieter, stay on nearby **Neil Island** (p488). From Havelock there are ferries to **Rangat** (p489), with a possible stop at **Long Island** (p475). From Rangat a bus runs up through Middle Andaman to **Mayabunder** (p489), where you can take a boat to tiny **Avis Island** (p489). From Mayabunder, travel overland to **Diglipur** (p489) on North Andaman (or take an overnight ferry from Port Blair to Diglipur), a remote area where you can climb Saddle Peak or laze on placid beaches.

Back in Port Blair, hire a moped or catch a bus and head down to **Wandoor** (p485), the jumping-off point for the **Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park** (p485) and Jolly Buoy and Red Skin Islands.

Travel in the beautiful Andaman Islands is a trip unto itself, with shimmering beaches, sun-warmed waters and enticing snorkelling and diving. This route covers about 800km to 1000km of land and ferry travel. You'll need a minimum of two weeks; standard permit restrictions limit you to 30 days.



TAILORED TRIPS

TEMPLES & PILGRIMAGES

If there's one thing that is bound to have a lingering impact on you during and after your South Indian wanderings, it's spirituality. To bask in South India's spiritual splendour, consider this itinerary, which follows in the footsteps of countless pilgrims and spiritual seekers. There's a particularly well-worn pilgrimage route through Tamil Nadu, which includes the temple towns of **Kanchipuram** (Kanchi; p414); **Tiruvannamalai** (p418); **Chidambaram** (p428); **Kumbakonam** (p431); **Thanjavur** (p434); **Trichy** (p438), with the Rock Fort Temple and Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple; **Madurai** (p445) for the renowned Sri Meenakshi Temple; **Rameswaram** (p443), one of the holiest Hindu pilgrimage places in India; and **Kanyakumari** (Cape Comorin; p451), where pilgrims flock to the Kumari Amman Temple and to see the sun rise and set at the southernmost tip of India.

Over in Andhra Pradesh, the Venkateshwara Temple at **Tirumala** (p318) receives as many as 100,000 pilgrims *per day*! In Karnataka, **Sravanabelagola** (p261) is an auspicious pilgrimage centre for Jains who come to honour the statue of Gomateshwara. **Gokarna** (p272), apart from being a beach paradise, is one of South India's most sacred sites for Shaivites who gather to worship at the Mahabaleshwara Temple. Meanwhile, **Nasik** (p148) is Maharashtra's holiest pilgrimage town and host (every 12 years) to the illustrious Kumbh Mela (p54).

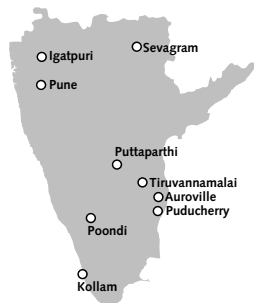


ASHRAM HOPPING

If you're seeking spiritual sustenance, South India has more than enough to keep you in deep contemplation for at least one lifetime. To get an insight into ashrams (spiritual retreats) see p106.

In Pune, the **Osho Meditation Resort** (p173) is the ashram of the late Bhagwan Rajneesh, which has long attracted travellers from around the globe. Serious devotees of Buddhist meditation should head for the **Vipassana International Academy** (p151) in Igatpuri. At Sevagram is the peaceful **Sevagram Ashram** (p165), established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933.

At Puttaparthi, **Prasanthi Nilayam** (p320) is the ashram of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, while in Tiruvannamalai, the **Sri Ramana Ashram** (p419) draws devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Puducherry is well known for the **Sri Aurobindo Ashram** (p421), established by a French woman known as 'the Mother'. Just outside Puducherry is **Auroville** (p428), the ashram offshoot that has developed into a large international community. The **Isha Yoga Center** (p463) in Poondi, is a little-known ashram, yoga retreat and place of pilgrimage. On the tropical Kerala backwaters near Kollam (Quilon) is the **Matha Amrithanandamayi Mission** (p346), the ashram of Matha Amrithanandamayi, known as the 'Hugging Mother' because of the *darshan* (blessing) she practices, often happily hugging thousands in a session.



CHASING THE FESTIVALS

The fantastical explosion of colour and sheer exuberance of Indian festivals make for a truly unforgettable experience – the trick is to be in the right place at the right time (see also p19).

Ganesh Chaturthi (August/September; p108) is celebrated all over South India, but is best experienced in Mumbai and Pune when these cities really burst to life. The **Ellora Dance & Music Festival** (March; p146) is a cultural event set against the stunning backdrop of the Kailasa Temple. Goa turns it on with India's most memorable Christian festivals, the biggest being the **Feast of St Francis Xavier** (3 December; p189) in Old Goa.



In Karnataka, one of the greatest **Dussehra** (September/October; p236) festivals takes place in Mysore. **Vasantahabba** (February; p236) showcases traditional and contemporary Indian dance and music. **Thrissur Pooram** (April; p323) offers spectacular elephant processions, while Alappuzha (Alleppey) hosts the inimitable **Nehru Trophy Snake Boat Race** (August; p323). The **Mamallapuram Dance Festival** (December/January; p389) is a splendid cultural event, as is the **International Yoga Festival** (January; p389) in Puducherry. The holy nine-day **Brahmotsavam** (September/October; p295) is held at Tirumala, while in Hyderabad, the **Deccan Festival** (February; p295) pays tribute to Deccan culture and includes traditional music and dance.

BLISSFUL BEACHES & BACKWATERS

Sun-worshippers will adore South India's gorgeous west-coast beaches, which have been luring travellers for decades. Throw in the postcard-perfect Kerala backwaters and you have the ultimate tropical-holiday package.

Begin with a bang in manic **Mumbai** (p107), soaking up the carnival atmosphere of Chowpatty Beach, before making your escape to India's favourite beach state, Goa. After visiting its capital **Panaji** (Panjim; p191) and the ruined former Portuguese capital of **Old Goa** (p198), select a beach that tickles your fancy for immediate sun and sand therapy. Hit the rails southwards and get off at Karwar for **Gokarna** (p272), a dusty pilgrimage town leading to a string of reasonably secluded beaches popular with the chillum-puffing crowd. If

you're visiting during the monsoon, a worthwhile detour from here is to **Jog Falls** (p271), India's highest waterfalls. Leaving Karnataka you enter the slender coastal state of Kerala. Pass through **Kozhikode** (Calicut; p378) and your next stop is the delightful island stronghold of Kochi's **Fort Cochin** (p361), reached from mainland Ernakulam. From there, head to **Alappuzha** (Alleppey; p343) for a serene houseboat journey through the dazzling backwaters of Kerala (p346). A short trip south, **Varkala** (p336) offers dramatic cliffs and beaches. Your final stop is near the southernmost tip of India: **Kovalam** (p331) is blessed with a small sweep of crescent beaches offering the perfect place to let your hair down.



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