

Botanical Treasures & Birds of South India

with Botanist, Randall Hitchin and local bird guides
September 1-16, 2020 - 15 nights / 15 days



OVERVIEW

Kerala Botanical Tour - Join botanist Randall Hitchin for a 15-day natural history tour through India's tropical south (Western Ghats), a land full of fertile forests, sweeping grasslands, life-saving medicinal plants, spice gardens, and tea plantations. The entire Western Ghats bio-geographic region is a major genetic ocean with an enormous biodiversity including 7,402 species of flowering plants and 1,814 species of non-flowering plants of which 56 genera and 2100 species are endemic. 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, 179 amphibian species, 6,000 insect species and 290 freshwater fish species are documented in the Western Ghats. Your journey will pass through the Pambadum Shola, – a high altitude forest which botanists consider a “living fossil,” and encompass a visit to Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, Trivandrum. The institute conserves the largest number of plant species among the botanical gardens in Asia.

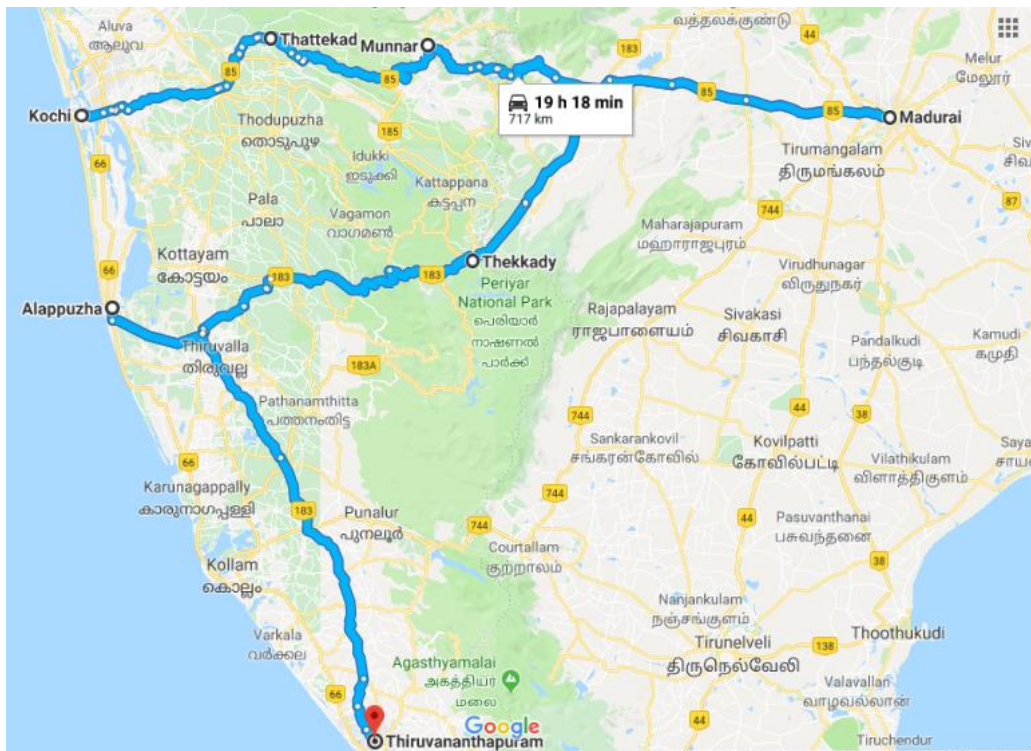
Local experts will enhance our understanding as we look for interesting and important flora and fauna. We will cruise on a wooden rice boat through Kochi's maze of backwaters to observe village life along the shore, walk in a spice plantation and learn about the many different uses of spices, both in medicine and food, and cross the Western Ghats to Tamil Nadu to visit Madurai where you will marvel at the intricately carved temples covered in vividly painted figures of deities, mythical creatures and monsters. Group size is limited to 14. Trip cost is \$5,450 **including** international airfare from Seattle, WA to Cochin departing August 30.

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the UNESCO World Heritage Site of “Western Ghats”
- Discover one of the eight "hottest hot-spots" of biological diversity in the world
- See many interesting and beautiful birds with experienced ornithological guides
- Stroll the old spice town of Cochin, a port since 1341, when a flood carved out its harbor and opened it to Arab, Chinese and European merchants.
- Experience life in a rural village
- Tour an Ayurvedic hospital, have an interactive session with ayurvedic doctor and learn about medicinal plants
- Visit the Munnar Tea Museum
- Tour spice gardens and coffee plantations at Thekkady
- Marvel at the beautiful temples in Madurai
- Cruise the Kerala backwaters on a traditional houseboat
- Interact with local cultures and learn about the Kerala’s history, culture, and religions in the context of its natural history

ROUTE MAP

COCHIN (3-N) - MUNNAR (3-N) -MADURAI (2-N)-THEKKADY (2-N) –HOUSEBOAT (1-N)-TRIVANDRUM (3-N)



DETAILED ITINERARY (subject to change as needed):

Day 01: Arrive Cochin- September 1

- Arrive Cochin Airport where we will be met and welcomed by our representative and transferred to the hotel
- Check in to the hotel and rest
- Evening introductory session on Western Ghats
- Overnight stay at Cochin

Day 02: Cochin – A Trip to Ayurveda Hospital & Pokkali Organic Farm

- After breakfast, drive to **Nagarjuna Ayurvedic Centre**-a full-fledged Ayurvedic Centre located on the banks of the river Periyar at Kalady in Kerala, that provides a complete range of Ayurvedic Treatments strictly conforming to the traditional practices
- Visit Herbal Garden, treatment rooms, pharmacy
- One hour session on Ayurveda by chief physician
- Enjoy traditional Ayurvedic Kerala Lunch (Vegetarian)
- Leave Kalady and drive to **Pokkali Organic Farm** to experience the authentic Kerala agricultural techniques
- Visit Pokkali Paddy field, the paddy grains cultivated in coastal area is called 'POKKALI PADDY'. It has high salt resisting power. This paddy plant is the tallest paddy plant and the paddy grain is the biggest grain in the world. Pokkali paddy grain genesis are used in International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) to produce new varieties of paddy grains to cultivate in coastal area fields. Pokkali rice has many nutritional properties like Iron, Zinc, Pottassium and Anti-Oxidant
- Visit fish cultivation field
- Practice crab hunting
- Enjoy canoe ride through narrow canals
- Overnight stay at Cochin

Nagarjuna Ayurvedic centre located on the banks of the river Periyar at Kalady near the city of Cochin in Kerala, is a Modern Ayurveda hospital providing a range of Ayurvedic treatments strictly conforming to the traditional practices. The centre blends deep Ayurvedic insights from more than 3 decades of experience with traditional skills in a truly scenic and serene environment to provide remedies. The hospital is NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals) accredited.



Pizhala Pokkali Organic Farm

Mr. E.D. Joseph, a graduate and diploma holder in Tourism and winner of the Best Farmer award is running this farm. He has 30 years of experiences in fully organic paddy-prawn-fish-crab cultivation.



Day 03 : Cochin –sightseeing

- Walking tour of Fort Cochin
- Visit the St. Francis Church, the oldest European church in India, built in 1503.
- Get a demonstration of famous Chinese fishing nets - These are huge cantilevered fishing nets believed to have brought to Kochi by Chinese traders.
- Visit Jewish Synagogue- The oldest active synagogue in the Commonwealth
- Go on to visit The Dutch Palace at Mattancherry renowned for its wall murals depicting scenes from the Ramayana
- Afternoon take a local ferry service from Mattancherry to Ernakulam City
- Evening walking tour of oldest local market in the city
- Dinner and overnight stay at Cochin



Day 04 : Cochin- Munnar via Thattekadu (140 kms /4-5 hrs)

- Early morning, check out from the hotel and proceed to Munnar
- Enroute visit Thattekadu forest/bird sanctuary
- Explore flora and fauna at Thattekad with a local expert on birds
- Lunch at a local restaurant
- Later drive to Munnar
- Upon arrival, check-in to hotel /resort.
- Overnight stay at Munnar

Thattekad Bird Sanctuary:

Here, you will be able to see southern tropical wet evergreen, semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forest types. Thattekad also has riparian forests and plantations of rosewood, mahogany and teak. The forests of Thattekad consist of the endangered *Dipterocarpus indicus*, the emergent giants of the evergreen forests, *Palaquium ellipticum* (Palai), *Dalbergia latifolia* (Indian Rosewood) which can be found in both evergreen and deciduous forests depending on where they are found, *Albizzia odoratissima* (Black Siris), *Bombax ceiba* (Red cotton), *Tectona grandis* (Teak) constituents of the deciduous forest type to name a few. Thattekad is Kerala's very first bird sanctuary and is home to 284 species of birds. The sanctuary is renowned for the rare Sri Lanka Frogmouth. Other endemics that can be spotted are Wayanad laughing thrush, Pompadour green pigeon, White bellied treepie, rufous babbler, crimson backed sunbird etc., Thattekad is definitely a paradise for professional or amateur bird watchers.

Munnar:

Three major landscape types with respect to vegetation that can be seen in Munnar are agriculture, forests and monoculture plantations of predominantly tea and eucalyptus. *Ochlandra travancorica* (elephant grass), endemic to Western Ghats, is another commercially important plant found in the lower reaches of the Munnar range of the Western Ghats.



Day 05 : Munnar – A Trip to The Chinnar Wild Life Sanctuary and The Eravikulam National Park

- Explore the Chinnar Wild Life Sanctuary
- Picnic Lunch
- Later go on to visit Eravikulam National Park
- Overnight stay at Munnar

The Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the rain-shadow region of the Western Ghats and therefore the vegetation is also different from the high ranges. The vegetation in Chinnar can be classified as southern tropical thorn forest (scrub jungle), southern dry deciduous forest, southern moist mixed deciduous forest, tropical riparian forest), southern montane wet temperate forest and wet grassland. More than 50% of the area is dominated by scrub species such as *Acacia* spp., *Euphorbia* spp., *Capparis* spp., *Opuntia* spp., *Ziziphus* spp., *Grewia* spp., *Albizia* spp., etc. Chinnar is well-known for the critically endangered grizzled giant squirrel, Asiatic elephants, sambhar deer, dhole and Indian gaur. Birds include: Grey headed bulbul, yellow throated bulbul, Blue faces Malkoha, Forest Eagle owl, Fish owl, White rumped shama, Grey breasted fly catcher, Mountain Imperial pigeon. [More on birds.](#)



Eravikulam National Park: 60% of the Eravikulam National Park consists of grasslands, while the rest of the area are covered by shola forests, montane wet temperate forests, and rock cliffs. The National Park was declared in 1976 to protect the endemic and endangered Nilgiri Tahr and also has flowering populations of the Neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*). The Shola-Grassland mosaic is unique to the Southern Western Ghats, and occurs only 1500 m above sea level.

Day 06 : Munnar – a trip to Pambadum shola forest & The Shristi

- Discover the famous **Pambadum shola forest**
- Lunch
- Visit tea museum (Closed on Mondays)
- Afternoon rest, explore, or take an optional tour of the Shristi Rehabilitation Centre for differently abled people
- Overnight stay at Munnar

Pampadum Shola National Park is representative of the Shola Ecosystem. The predominant grass species of the shola-grassland mosaic are: species of the *Arundinella* genus, *chrysopogon zeylanicus*, *cymbopogon flexuosus* (lemon grass) to name a few. The Shola forest consists of species like *Magnolia nilagirica*, *Cedrela toona* (Indian Mahogany), *Ficus glomerata* (Cluster fig tree), *Syzigium* spp etc. Once you move past Pampadum Shola towards Vattawada village, you will see the landscape dominated by vegetable farming and trees such as apple, peach and eucalyptus grandis. **Birds** you might spot include most of the endemic birds of this region like Nilgiri Flycatcher, Kerala Laughing thrush, Black and rufous flycatcher, Nilgiri wood pigeon and a lot more. Also, this national park is also known for Indian Gaur, Sambar deer, Nilgiri langur, Nilgiri Marten, Malabar giant squirrel and possibly, elephants.



Day 07 : Munnar –Madurai (160 kms /apprx 4 hrs)

- After breakfast, check out from hotel and proceed to Madurai
- Tamil Nadu has predominantly Tropical wet evergreen, dry evergreen & semi evergreen, Tropical moist & dry deciduous, Tropical thorn, Sub-Tropical Broad-leaved hill, Montane wet temperate and Littoral and swamp.
- You will pass through Theni District in Tamil Nadu to reach Madurai and since Theni receives more rainfall than most districts in Tamil Nadu, the watershed is good for tree growth in the area. You can see that the Theni

landscape is dominated by grasslands and scrub jungles as the elevation decreases during the ride to Madurai.

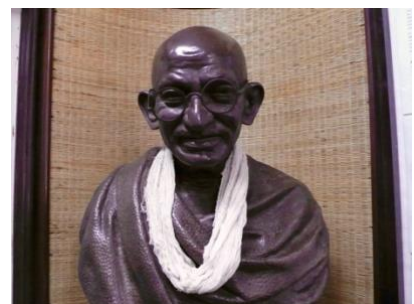
- Since Madurai has tropical climate throughout the year, there is not much diversity with respect to tree species. Madurai was once known for its famous bur-flower tree (kadamba tree) and is now limited to the Alagarkoil the famous Meenakshi Amman Temple in the city of Madurai. Trees native to Madurai such as palm (also fast disappearing), tamarind (seen all along the highway), Ooga (another tree unique to Madurai), Ficus spp. and Syzigium cumini (Black Jamun) can be seen in and around the city. A lone ooga tree can be seen in Gandhi Museum and a couple in American College. The landscape is dominated by agriculture fields. Paddy and ragi (finger millet) are the main crops grown in the area.
- On arrival check-in to hotel, rest, swim in the pool, or look for birds on the hotel grounds. There are many resident interesting bird species here.
- Evening proceed to Meenakshi temple to witness aarti ceremony.
- Overnight stay at Madurai.

Madurai is a major temple town of South India, located in nearby state of Tamil Nadu. Madurai is famous for the Meenakshi Temple, with its towering gopurams and rare sculptures. Here the architectural marvels of the temples and the exquisite sculptures fascinate all those who have a look at them. You can also participate in the many festivals and regale in the rich tradition of the locals
Dinner and Overnight stay at Madurai



Day 08: Madurai-sightseeing

- Don't miss this morning's Vanakkam (means welcome in Tamil language) private interactive walking tour of Madurai! At the first light of dawn, walk the quiet streets as the city awakens. Observe first-hand how everyday life begins in this Indian city from prayer rituals at the temple to market shopping -- truly a total immersion into the culture.
- Return for breakfast, followed by a visit to the ancient Meenakshi Amman Temple, an enormous Nayak complex built between 1623 and 1655, as a majestic testament to their ruler.
- Visit the massive Thirumalai Nayakkar Palace with its imposing courtyard, grand throne chambers and entry flanked by stone carved horses.
- A visit to the Gandhi Museum follows with an opportunity to learn about this remarkable man lovingly called the "Father of the Nation" instrumental in India's fight for independence



Day 09 : Madurai- Thekkady (140 kms /apprx 4 hrs)

- Today, drive to Thekkady, perched high in the Cardamom Hills, Its variety of flora and fauna, pristine lakes and magnificent forests will surely make this visit most memorable.
- After time to relax and settle in at the hotel, stroll leisurely through one of the area's **spice plantations**. You'll hear about the many different ways to use these spices in both medicines and in the preparation of food.
- In the evening, you have time to explore on your own, rest, or join the optional **Kalaripayattu Martial Art Show** at a local theater. Kalaripayattu, one of the oldest fighting styles in the world, is believed to have been adapted from various martial art forms like karate, kung-fu, and judo
- Overnight stay at Thekkady.

Periyar National Park & Tiger Reserve (Thekkady) is the best-known wildlife sanctuary in South India, home to elephants, antelope, deer and many species of birdlife. most popular wildlife sanctuary, encompassing an area of 777 sq km. The tiger reserve has high percentage of endemism in flora. You can see evergreen, deciduous, shola and savannah forest types. The protected area has about 500 species of Southern Western Ghats endemics such as 23 species of Strobilanthes, 26 species of Impatiens, 6 species of Syzgium etc. and has a number of other rare and threatened species within the Reserve. About 350 species of medicinal plants are also found within the reserve. The Tiger Reserve is surrounded by cardamom, tea, pepper and coffee plantations.



Day 10: Thekkady

- Thrilling activities await you today at the acclaimed Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary.
- Begin the day with a **nature walk inside** the National Park. Pass through evergreen and deciduous forests accompanied by your local guide, who informs you about the local flora and fauna.
- Take a scenic Jeep ride to Ottakathalamedu, 1300 meters above sea level, for panoramic views of Thekkady.
- Afterward, a **boat ride** on the picturesque lake where you are likely to see wild elephants, giant squirrels, and many other wild animals. Tonight, enjoy dinner together at the hotel and perhaps a relaxing ayurvedic massage.
- Overnight stay at Thekkady.



Day 11: Thekkady –Houseboat (175 kms/ apprx 4 hrs)

- After breakfast, check out and proceed to Alleppey to board a houseboat.

- Experience unforgettable houseboat cruise through the mesmerizing backwaters, something unique to Kerala.
- Enjoy the sumptuous traditional lunch on banana leaves
- Experience different species of the tropical and water plants.
- Dinner and overnight stay in the houseboat

Houseboats or Kettuvallams “are huge, tapering barges which were traditionally used to cargo rice and other goods across Kerala. It has a portion covered with bamboo and coir serving as kitchen and rest rooms for the crew. These boats are entirely built without the use of nails. Planks of jack wood are woven together with coir ropes and coated with a black resin made from boiled cashew kernels.

Modern-day Kettuvallams carry finished bedrooms, modern toilets, cosy living rooms, a kitchen, and even a balcony where tourists can laze on cushions. Sections of the carved roof of wood and plaited palms open out to provide shade and allow an uninterrupted view. Cruise through the tranquil backwaters, wider and narrow canals passing by lush green paddy fields, villages, temples, churches, rustic houses etc. giving you opportunity to view the life on the backwaters –it beats at its own gentle rhythm

Day 12: Houseboat - Kovalam (180 kms /pparx 4 hrs)

- Wake up to the chatter of the water birds. A traditional Kerala breakfast prepared by the houseboat crew awaits you.
- Disembark the houseboat boat after an unforgettable life time experience and drive south towards Kovalam, the world-famous beach destination of Kerala.
- Enroute visit a mangrove-based aqua farm. Overnight stay at Kovalam.



Kovalam

With three adjacent crescent beaches, Kovalam has been a favorite haunt of tourists, especially Europeans, since the 1930s. A massive rocky promontory on the beach has created a beautiful bay of calm waters ideal for sea bathing. The leisure options at this beach are plenty and diverse - sunbathing, swimming, herbal body toning massages, special cultural programmes, Catamaran cruising etc.

Day 13: Kovalam – A Full day trip to Tropical Botanic Garden and Research institute.

- Morning breakfast at 0800 hrs
- At 0900 hrs, drive to Palode botanical garden. Meet with the scientists at 1030 hrs.
- Tropical Botanic Garden and Research institute (TBGRI) conducts research in Conservation Biology, Biotechnology, Plant Taxonomy, Microbiology, Phytopharmacology, Ethno medicine and Ethopharmacology for plant improvement and utilization. TBGRI also undertakes research on medicinal plants, ornamental plants and various introduced plants of economic or aesthetic value. The institute conserves the largest number of plant species among the botanical gardens in Asia.
- Lunch at 1300 hrs
- Field visit of the botanical garden at 1400 hrs.
- Drive back to hotel at 1600 hrs

- Overnight stay at Kovalam/Poovar.



Day 14: Kovalam

- Full day at leisure or free for independent activities.
- Overnight stay at Kovalam/Poovar

Day 15: Kovalam –Trivandrum airport (Departure) There are no activities on your final day. In time transfer to Cochin international airport to connect your onward flight.

Trip cost: \$5450 includes: International airfare from Seattle, WA, all transportation within India, accommodations (on a sharing basis) in four and five-star hotels, breakfasts and dinners, three lunches, porters, bottled water, hotel and driver tips, entrance fees. Cost does not include drinks, room service, non-group activities, personal expenses, or international airfare.

fees, and group activities. It also includes a specially prepared orientation booklet and personal advice on A deposit of \$500 will reserve your spot (fully refundable before December 30, 2019). 50% of the total cost of the tour is due by January 1, 2020. If the retreat/tour is cancelled due to lack of participants, you will be granted a full refund. A minimum of 8 people is required for the trip to occur. You will be contacted after January 1, 2020 to let you know if we have met our minimum. Please send in your check with the [registration form](#) as soon as possible to guarantee your place and help us make all the transportation and hotel bookings in a timely way.



EARLY BIRD SPECIAL

Register before November 15, 2019 and receive a complimentary ayurvedic spa treatment of your choice at any hotel on your trip!

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