

STAY AT  
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF  
LIFESTYLE  
STAFF TRAVEL  
SPOTTED BY SITA  
TOP CHEF RECOMMENDS  
DESTINATION INSIDER  
6 THINGS WE LIKED ABOUT  
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# Art of Travel



## Aanavilasam



# Stay At

Aanavilasam is a plantation house spread across 7 acres of private estate, located just 8 kms from the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (Thekaddy). Owned by Salim Pushpanath, a celebrated photographer of Kerala, this cosy place has only 4 rooms. Surrounded by a Cardamom and Pepper plantation, the tastefully done up rooms exude the feel of a country house. The fireplace and the old fashioned book shelves in the main living room would remind you of a typical planter's life. The bathrooms are top notch and the evening sunset across the Western Ghats is simply stunning. Your hostess, Pirrko Paxton (more about Pirrko in our Day in a Life of section), is very welcoming, provides great advice and good humoured conversation.

Says Kuntal from our Destination Knowledge Centre, who recently stayed at Aanavilasam "I get wary when properties use the word Luxury because so far my experience has been either: its non-existent, mediocre or over the top. But thankfully Aanavilasam is an exception. It turned out to be a beautiful place to relax with all the comforts in complete privacy. It's ideal for FIT clients wanting to unwind after the hectic and dusty temple circuit of Tamilnadu. I stayed at one of their Pool Villas. Their Pool Villas come with a private plunge pool and has all the subtle touches of the artist, that its owner Salim is. I particularly liked the idea of the glass wall in front of its superbly comfortable bed overlooking the plunge pool. Perfect place to lie down to romance the canopies and to enjoy the quiet and calm. I thought it was also a brilliant idea to have a hostess. A place like Aanavilasam would fall flat on its face without one. Hostess Pirrko Paxton and I had an interesting conversation over dinner, starting with her impulsive decision to sell everything in the UK and move to India to the toughest clients she handled at Aanavilasam. Aanavilasam is not cheap, but when it comes to a small, cosy place to unwind which is subtly luxurious and private, it doesn't have any competition at the moment in Thekaddy. And when you check-out you get a cook book full of Aanavilasam recipes autographed by Salim, the Chef and Pirrko."





## Hostess, Aanavilasam

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When we asked Pirrko Praxton, the hostess of Aanavilasam about the toughest clients she handled so far at the property, she told us about this couple checking-in on a particular rainy day. “It was September and raining incessantly for a couple of nights and it was cold,” she tells us. “And when they arrived I could see that the lady was very unhappy. They were not expecting the rain and had a difficult time with the driver.” Things became really difficult when the lady didn’t want to check-in. “She casted herself into the sofa and said I want to go home. And that was a really tough moment. I didn’t know what to say,” Pirrko tells us. After the lady calmed down a bit and had a cup of coffee which Pirrko offered, she wanted to know what she can do now. And suddenly, and almost instantly Pirrko gave her an idea. “I don’t know what made me say it but I told her how about buying fabric and visiting a tailor in town,” says Pirrko. And the lady loved the idea. “I couldn’t believe it when she told me that; Pirrko did anybody tell you that you are brilliant,” she tells us. Pirrko organised a new car for the couple and they had 2 very enjoyable days at Aanavilasam.

When Pirrko and her husband moved to India, the decision was as instant. “Neither me nor my husband knew India well when we decided to sell everything in the UK and move to India. We gave ourselves 5 years,” she tells us. Pirrko came on a holiday with her husband to Kerala and was fascinated by what they experienced. So is she finally calling India her home? “I wouldn’t want to go back to England,” Pirrko tells us. Pirrko is the first to wake up at Aanavilasam. Mornings are spent making sure that wake up calls, bead-teas are on time, the check-outs are smooth and requests for any activities actioned satisfactorily. And also preparing for breakfast. “We work as team here and share each other’s work. I sometime lay the breakfast table or carry bed tea,” Pirrko tells us. For Indian clients; mostly families and corporates, her team members have clear briefs to step in; if need be, while interacting for any specific meals or any other requests. While the Chef speaks Hindi, there is one staff who speaks Malayalam, the local language and another Tamil, for guests from nearby Tamilnadu. Post breakfast she meets the Head of Housekeeping to take stock of the preparations for the day’s check-in, which happens mostly in the afternoons. In between, she answers emails from direct clients. Once the guests have checked-in, Pirrko hangs around for a while in case something needs her

# A Day in The Life of Pirrko Praxton



attention. She then meets the Chef to prepare for dinner. So do people eat together? “Well yes. We join the tables and people bond very well. There are guests who want to eat alone on the first day, but eat with everyone together on the second,” she tells us. Pirrko is sometimes joined by her husband John, during the conversations with guests over dinner. “I guess it gives them a different perspective. Seeing India through the eyes of the non-natives, who are not experts but who find India equally fascinating,” she tells us. After ensuring that everyone is comfortable in their rooms post dinner, Pirrko is the last to go to bed in Aanavilasam.

So how did she end up as a hostess in Aanavilasam? After Pirrko and her husband moved to India they started staying in an Estate Bungalow close to Aanavilasam. [click here to continue reading](#)



# Lifestyle



## Mundakayam Club

Mundakayam Club is a 100 years of good cheers and still going. If you are passing by this side of Kerala, I invite you for a drink at the Club over wonderful stories of this glade in the pool to the land of Indian Rubber. You can be my guest at the [Evergreen Estate Bungalow](#) ; my home with only 2 bedrooms or stay at the 1, Hill House (more in our 6 Things We Liked About section) my Aunt's place at Peermade; another small cosy place with 2 bedrooms.

Mundakayam; the gateway to the high ranges of Kerala came into existence in 1847 when Henry Baker, an English Missionary had chosen it to be the headquarters of his hill mission. It has been said, that the site selected by Henry Baker for his camp shed was near a pool inhabited by Herons. He was delighted and happy with the site and named it "The Herons Pool"... a literal translation of The Herons Pool in Malayalam; the local language was 'Mundi-kayam, which in due course of time and by repeated usage became "Mundakayam". Mundakayam by the dawn of 20th century was to become the home of the early Indian Rubber which was introduced in 1902. With the establishment of British residency in Peermade; a hill station not too far away from Mundakayam as a suitable tea-planting destination during 1875 -1885, Mundakayam became a very convenient halting place for tea planters traveling from Kottayam and Alleppy. Mundakayam soon was no longer a halting place but was developing its own identity. With the network of new roads being constructed and more planters coming in with new openings, the stage was well being set for get togethers and parties, mostly organised in private owned bungalows in rotations.

Consequently, serious thought had been given for alternative arrangements and the need for a common gathering place. It was in 1912 the Planters took a vital decision to use the surplus amount of Rs 2000 in the accounts of Mundakayam Rubber Planters Association to build a Planters Hall for the purpose of holding meetings. In 1914 it was suggested that the name of the Planters Hall be altered to Mundakayam Club. The Mundakayam club was very popular during 1920-1940 and continued to be a favoured place of social gathering in the Post Independence times in 1950 to 1960 with an eclectic guest list of literary luminaries, political leaders and Bollywood stars. The local planting community embraced the club and went to



make it very popular for regular dinners and games that were organised there.

After a sluggish 1980s, the club became active by 1990 and into millennium of which I have fond memories. I remember a planters week and the inter club competitions. I was a 25 year old young man cheerfully being with our elderly uncles who were excellent planters. The Inter club cricket was at Peermade grounds with the Mundakayam narrowly winning it. George Kallivayalil, my uncle went on to hit a half century to be the saviour. We danced and dined into the wee hours of the night. I was busy sneaking Gin and Tonic for our gang of new members, who were added that year. Next week we had the Lawn Tennis competition which was always the best crowd puller at the Club. We boys cheered throughout the matches and had a great time. Mundakayam Club is all set to celebrate the centenary of the Mundakayam Club in 2012 -2013. The Club building is getting renovated and a lovely twin cottage is also underway. A synthetic lawn tennis court is getting constructed along with an elevated lobby and a patio for members to enjoy the game after having a few drinks at the new Air-conditioned Bar.

About the Author: George Abraham is a planter, history buff and a writer. He is a friend of Sita and is into plantation tourism in a grand manner. George's new coffee-table book "The Path to the Hills: History of the Plantations of Western Ghats, Southern India" was launched in a committee room of the British Parliament recently.



# Staff Travel



## Delhi by Night

I arrived twenty minutes prior at the meeting point of our Night Walk at Chandni Chowk - gate number 5, Chandni Chowk Metro Station. It was buzzing with people. I kept a lookout for my guide as I had never met him before. My attention was soon drawn to a man wearing bright colours, talking to a foreigner couple. I approached him and he turned out to be our guide. As the people on the walk started to trickle in, it gave us a chance to talk and get introduced. To tell you the truth I was a little apprehensive about the whole idea. Doing a walk, that too at night in Chandni Chowk. The couple was German and had heard about this walk from a friend. Our guide joined in the conversation saying that he usually kept the group to a size small but this time there were so many last minute requests that he had to make an exception. Himanshu or H as I call him, was completely relaxed and at ease as if he knew these streets like the back of his hands. Finally most of the people on the walk had arrived. Rest we met later. We moved to a place where H made a small introduction about what we were going to do for the next couple of hours. As I looked at the group, we were an unusual mix. Susan working at the British Commission was here with her husband Rob who in turn had got along friends visiting them. Deepak was a practising lawyer. There was another couple who had recently settled in India and were eager to explore the city. And there were others, who I got to interact later as the walk progressed.

Chandni Chowk literary means the 'Moonlit Square'. It is said that during the Mughal times the water in the pool in the square used to reflect the moon light and that is how it got its name. Its speciality is the variety of markets. Each of the galis (lanes) represents a specialty market- from shoes, to jewellery, to books, to wedding cards and food. Chandni Chowk also has the distinction of being perhaps the only market that also houses an equally amazing number of places of worship of all religions practiced in India.

After the brief by H, we started our walk weaving our way through the narrow lanes of Chandni Chowk. A lot of locals looked surprised. They did not expect visitors at this time of the evening in the back lanes of their homes. They looked on in amusement sometimes joining us, hearing H explaining the history of the Havelis, markets and cuisine. Rob commented that H was like the pied piper of Hamelin. The hiccup for everyone not used to Old Delhi came when we crossed



the street in front of Sisgandh Gurudwara. H crossed nonchalantly and the rest of the people suddenly in two minds waiting for the traffic to ebb. H told us just look for a slight opening and cross confidently. That was that. Rest of the tour, no one had a problem. What fascinated me the most was the lively streets. People navigating their way effortlessly through the noise, crowd and compact spaces. I had heard that the shops around the Jama Masjid stay open till the wee hours of the morning. But now I believed it. Something else that fascinated all of us was the network of wires that followed us above our heads, wherever we went. An outsider would go mad trying to figure out which pole served electricity to which house. But not the electricians in Old Delhi. Near Ballimaran lane, one of our fellow walkers commented that the buildings looked like they had been bombed. H explained that that was not the case. The façade had probably crumbled and fallen down. Many buildings here although centuries old are privately owned. So ironically the owners were free to tear down the structure and build a new one. Vicky, another fellow walker, who had been here few times before with her friends, told us that although many heritage buildings were now banks; they had no money to renovate these structures. [Click here to read more](#)

About the Author: Soumya Mukherji is the most recent member of our Destination Knowledge Centre. He recommends this walk for adventurous clients, who don't want anything too structured and are happy soaking in the atmosphere of Old Delhi by night.

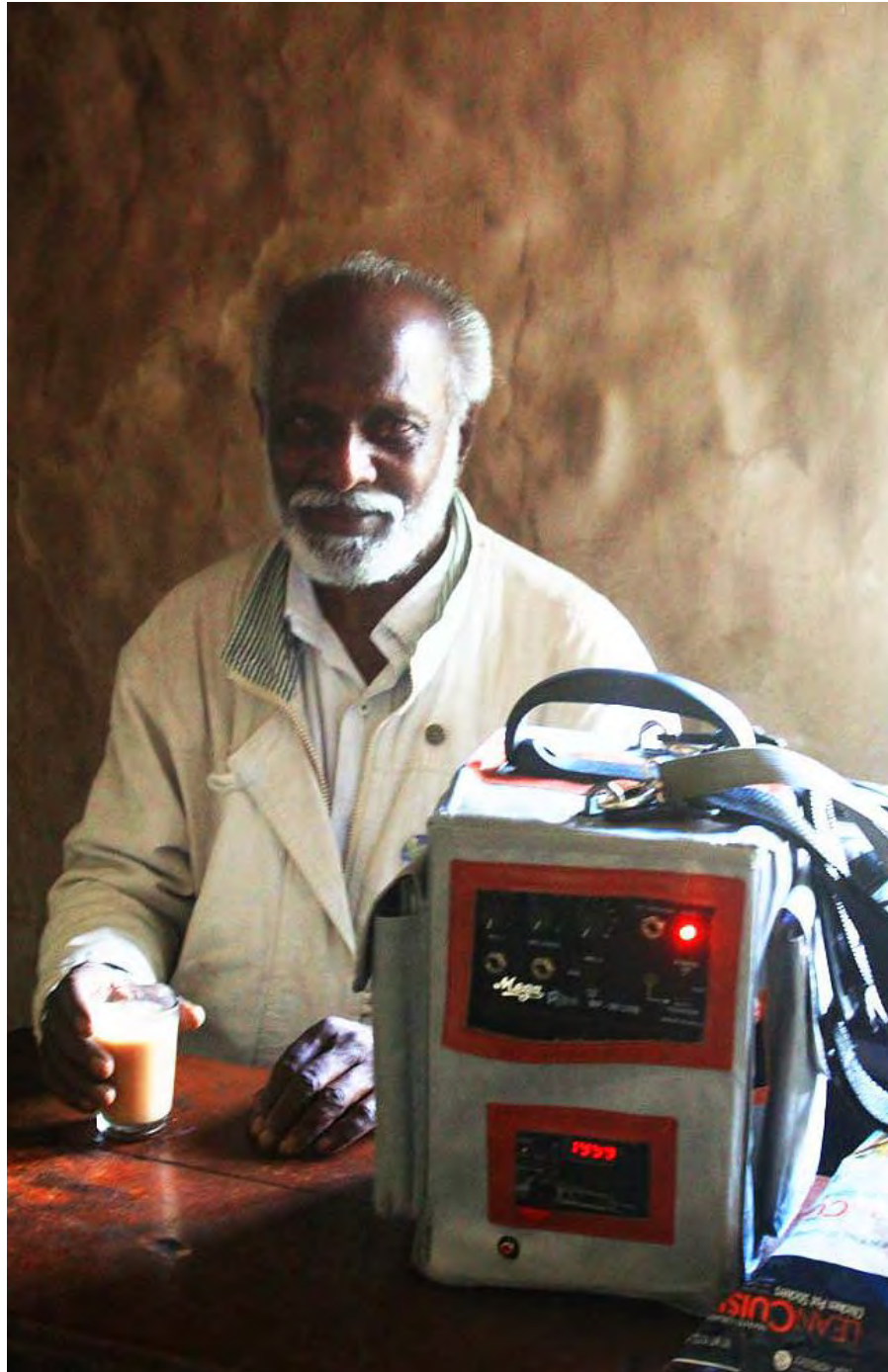


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## The Wandering Pentecostal

Sita spotted David Das, a devout Pentecostal with his audio device at the worker's canteen of a Tea Estate in Munnar. David travels on foot in and around Munnar spreading the message of God, pre-recorded in his audio device. “During one of my trips to Kerala last year, I spent 10 minutes in a Pentecostal Church in the backwaters. There was a roomful of believers chanting in total gibberish to the beating of drums, some of them in complete trance. I could feel a very strong energy reverberating in the small room. I even met a lady who apparently was cured of cancer by faith healing. I asked many locals about the Pentecostals. Most asked me to stay away. I don't know why. A theologian friend in Delhi called them militants of the Church,” adds Kuntil from our Destination Knowledge Centre. When we cautiously broached the subject by buying him a cup of tea, David told us with a smile that these apprehensions about the Pentecostals are all rubbish. “It's the sacred language of God and we don't need any intermediaries. It's about a direct personal experience with God which also has the power to heal,” said David.

# Spotted By Sita





## Lazy Chicken

Mani and Sylvie of [Periyar Reserve Bungalow](#) recommend Lazy Chicken; its signature dish, as a must try during your stay there. A whole chicken marinated with spices is first wrapped in a banana leaf, then covered in foil paper and finally a newspaper. After a generous application of a thick mud paste, the chicken is then put inside a furnace with the help of a shovel and left there for about 90 minutes. "Our guests love it and they are most welcome to help us when we prepare it in the evening," says Mani and Sylvie.

Periyar Reserve Bungalow with only 3 rooms is set deep inside the forest amidst a sprawling private cardamom plantation. The property is sandwiched between the tropical evergreen forests of Periyar Tiger Reserve and Rani Reserve. A gurgling stream which rushes down the rocks below separates the property from the Periyar Tiger Reserve. It can be accessed by a mud road which can be traversed only by a 4WD Jeep or horseback through thick foliage. Periyar Reserve Bungalow is not for everyone. Facilities are basic. Access is difficult. But those looking for a complete get-away- from- it- all, the unique isolation and atmospheric setting of the property compares to none in Kerala.

Recipe available on [request](#).

# Top Chef Recommends





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## Tiger for a Day

The day after Halloween I got an email from my friend Dick Sakahara from Los Angeles saying that the Pulikali Tigers of Kerala would have been a huge hit on Halloween night in West Hollywood. He was telling me that it's a very cool area where the streets on Halloween night are traffic free and a huge crowd gathers in the most crazy costumes for the Halloween party. It seems we are yet to recover from the wild and electric atmosphere and the unbelievable Pulikali Tiger Dance experience we had this September. Dick, his wife Arleen and I went to see the Pulikali Tiger Dance in Thrissur; 53 miles North of Cochin and what a crazy time we had on the streets, cheering for the Tigers from the neighbourhood which was right behind our hotel. I met the Sakaharas during a cruise to the Sunderbans in 2010 and had helped them put an itinerary together, where they visited the Tiger Parks in Central India along with Mumbai, Goa and Bhuj in Gujarat. That was in November 2011; their eighth trip to India. Dick came back in January this year saying he wanted to go see the Pulikali Tiger Dance and we need to work on an itinerary weaved around it with a week or so in a nice Kerala beach to relax. We agreed on 4 nights at Thrissur just to be doubly sure as it is quite normal for local festivals in India to change dates at the last minute. More so; we thought, for a festival like the Pulikali Tiger Dance which is non-touristy. In fact we were the only "tourists" and we saw four youngsters from France and Japan on the day of the Pulikali dance having a good time prancing with the Tigers.

The Pulikali Tiger Dance is held in Thrissur on the 4th day of Onam every year and marks a carnivalesque finish to Kerala's harvest Festival. The pantomime-cum-parade dance where potbellied men dance with tiger faces painted on their rotund bellies to rustic drumbeats is said to be nearly 200 years old. But no one knows how it all began at Thrissur. While some locals say that Pulikali was brought to Kerala by Muslims who performed the dance during their mourning festival of Muharram; some say the local Maharaja wanted a new dance, something macho, as a part of the Onam celebrations with steps that mime hunting moves and tactics. And Onam is such a brilliant time to land in Kerala. The joie de vivre was palpable the moment I landed at Cochin airport. The sight of crisp white bush shirts to go with the mundus wrapped around the waist and women in their elegant Kerala saris with a golden border, unique to the state; greeted me. We didn't do much on Day 1 as we were

# Destination Insider



tired. There was a Philippino all girls band performing on the 10th floor with a makeshift bar and a massive Onam spread laid out for dinner. We decided to take it easy in our rooms after a few beers and sandwiches. The Sakaharas were into the second week of their India holiday and Dick wanted a Hamburger real bad. We had a terrible start to Day 2. It was raining; not that we were not prepared. Dick got these really super handy water proof cameras and limited edition Crocs. But Vinod Nambiar; the Executive Director of Vayali ; a local folklore group who promised to take us to rural artists didn't turn up at the agreed meeting point. It was a 45 minute drive from our hotel. His mobile phone wasn't working. And when we finally got an alternative number from a villager, our man was already on the train to Cochin. Mr. Nambiar simply decided to dump us.

I was furious. But later thought perhaps it was not a good idea to plan such a visit when people are in such a festive mood. But I would have definitely appreciated if Mr. Nambiar was more upfront about any difficulties. After the Vayali fiasco, we headed out to explore the local Onam festivities. Locals recommended we should go see the Onathallu which was happening not so far away. It sounded really crazy. But it seems people bash each other up as part of the celebration. Basically a free for all friendly thrashing with bare hands. But it wasn't our day. Our car was damaged in a nasty pile up on the highway. Luckily no one was hurt. We reached our hotel ferried halfway by the police in a rickety Ambassador Car and then a SUV; also organised by the police from some point. We were sad about the vehicle getting damaged. More so because our brilliant driver Pankaj was talking about his new vehicle with so much of pride. Now we weren't even sure if we were going to see Pankaj again, as he had to take the damaged vehicle back to Cochin and organise a new vehicle for us. I ordered room service for Kerala Beef Curry and Rice. Dick by then would have killed for his Hamburger - [Click here to read more](#)



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## 1, Hill House, Peermade

1. Laidback with a capital L: 1, Hill House, Peermade with only 2 rooms is laidback with a capital L. “When owners Rani and John showed me photographs of 1, Hill House 2 years back, they were telling me that they plan to keep it special and exclusive as any second home could be. Maybe a few clients from select tour operators, family, friends and their friends. It looked good and I promised a visit. But when I stayed there last September, the experience exceeded my expectations,” says Kuntil from our Destination Knowledge Centre. 1, Hill House is quietly tucked away in an area which belongs to the scions of a prominent planter family of Peermade; a hill station and gateway to the high ranges and spice plantations of Kerala. “It’s not far away from the main highway. But once inside you escape into another world; laidback and totally relaxed where you couldn’t be bothered about time and space,” says Kuntil. 1, Hill House is perfect for clients who want to unwind whilst enjoying a slice of the local planter’s life and maybe a drink at the Mundakayam Club which is not too far away (more in the Lifestyle section). Ideal for 2 or 3 nights, after the hectic and dusty temple circuit of Tamilnadu and enroute to Kerala. 1, Hill House does not have a website and Rani and John plan to keep it that way. “We are too old for this technology business and are happy meeting interesting people and playing hosts,” says Rani with a smile. We agree, for that’s what they do best.

2. Rani and John: Keeping 1, Hill House low profile had allowed Rani and John to host every guest till now, though they don’t stay at the property. They stay at Alleppey and travel to Peermade every time there are guests. “And once the guests have left we also relax in our second home which works out real good for us,” says Rani. “At the 1, Hill House I loved the attention to detail by Rani and John. From the linen, the amenities, the cutlery, to the food, to the difficult choice between evening tea with the most amazing snacks which Rani recalled having as a child and the sun downers which John himself pours, it has been very special,” says Kuntil. John; who is retired, has an unusual hobby apart from collecting antiques. Every time they pull down a church, an old building or a choir factory he would be there to buy the doors, windows, gables railings, wooden stair cases et al and store it in his Alleppey House. They gradually made it to Peermade and were restored as the 1, Hill House was getting built. The pièce de résistance would be the Confession Box in the Bar. It had a small tin plate which said “Raise your Spirits”.

# 6 Things We Liked About



The chairs of the Bar are from a Bank where the Cashier used to sit and go about his daily work. And by the way, if you have guests passing by Alleppey after the Rice Barge Cruise we can ask Rani to take them out on her [“Alleppey on Foot” Tour](#), given sufficient lead time. She serves a good lunch at the end of the tour in her home.

3. Junk Stories: What makes 1 Hill House very special is also the way the couple had recycled the entire junk, John had bought. “It blends beautifully. You could see that they were not trying hard. Nothing sticks out,” says Kuntil. The wooden staircase which leads to the room that Rani and John keep for themselves while hosting guests, had one of India’s Prime Minister walking on it. Old Sewing Machines were fitted with tiles hand painted by Ajulejo Artists of Goa as serving tables, where we had some amazingly delicious snacks in the afternoon and breakfast. The railings of the sitting area which overlooks the foothills of the Western Ghats were from an old college building that was demolished. Lamp Stands near the fireplace were made from the Altar Rails. John even had a wooden trolley in working condition which was used to transport goods to the ships when Alleppey was a thriving port before Cochin. Every piece of junk John had bought, had a story to it which he happily shares with his guests.

4. Food: We really liked the idea of Rani and John keeping the food at 1, Hill House from their family kitchens with the staff having trained there, who do an exceptional job. They served food which the couple eat on a daily basis at home and had grown up eating. “That meant more stories to be shared over delicious Kerala meals,” says Kuntil. Whether it was the Vattayappam - Kerala’s queen of steamed rice cakes for breakfast which melts in your mouth, the delicious combo of fresh fish, prawns and squids for dinner, or the Egg Appam Hoppers, Banana Fritters and home made Chocolate Mousse for dessert, everything was shared over hearty conversations, where great stories were recalled. Rani is happy to do a cooking class for your guests if they take fancy to the home food. [Click here to read more](#)



# Festivals

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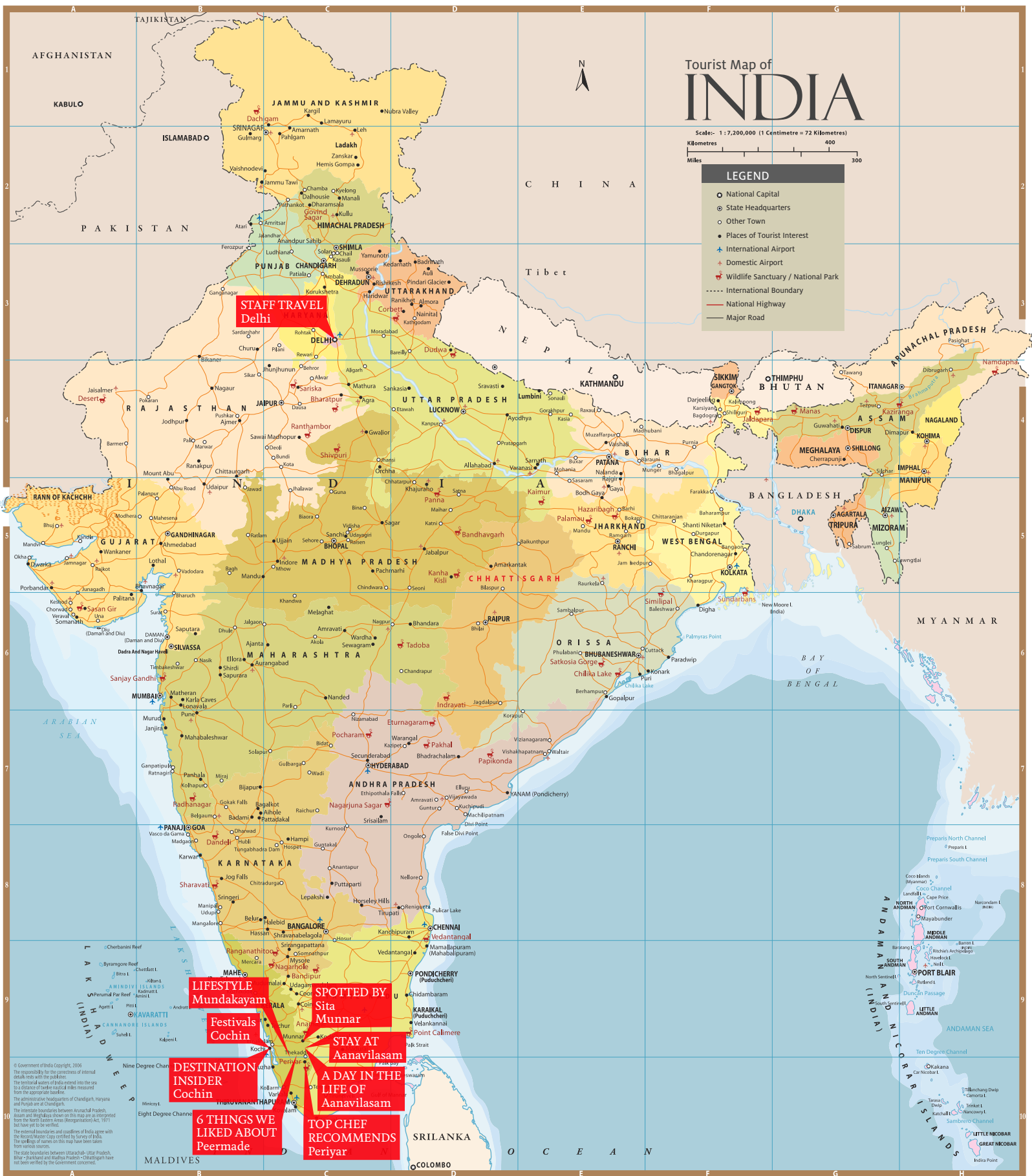
## Cochin Carnival, Fort Cochin, 31st Dec- 1st Jan, 2013

If there is one festival the whole of Cochin impatiently awaits every year, it is the Cochin Carnival. Held in the last week of December, Fort Kochi is festooned and tourists, not only from within the country, but also outside flock to this lovely port city to participate in the revelry. The beginning of the Cochin Carnival can be traced back to the Portuguese New Year revelry, held here during the colonial days. Gradually, it evolved to take the form of what is today popularly called the Cochin Carnival of Kerala. Preparations begin months in advance for hosting unique games, fairs and partying during the Carnival. The highlight of the Carnival is the massive procession on New Year's Day. The festivities and revelries continue till midnight of December 31st with fireworks and the carnival rally on 1st January, marking the grand finale.



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Photo Credit: Edward KP/Koder House



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details rests with the publisher.  
The territorial waters of India extend into the sea  
to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured  
from the appropriate baseline.  
The administrative headquarters of Chandigarh, Haryana  
and Punjab are at Chandigarh.  
The interstate boundaries between Arunachal Pradesh,  
Assam and Meghalaya shown on this map as interpreted  
from the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971  
but have yet to be verified.  
The external boundaries and coastlines of India agree with  
the Revised India Map Surveyed by Survey of India.  
The spellings of names on this map have been taken  
from various sources.  
The state boundaries between Uttaranchal- Uttar Pradesh,  
Bihar - Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh - Chhattisgarh have  
been taken from the Survey of India.



Meet us at the  
Upcoming  
Trade Shows

If you wish to schedule a meeting, do e-mail us at  
[info@sita.in](mailto:info@sita.in)

Trade Shows	Booth No.	Whom to Meet
<b>WTM</b> London 5th -8th November	Hall No S10, Booth No IN300	Dipak Deva & Neeraj Bhatt
<b>Kerala Tourism Road Show</b> Frankfurt 14th November	Sita Desk	Gabrielle Heyne
<b>ILTM</b> Cannes 3rd -6th December	F 130	Dipak Deva & Philip Thomas
<b>USTOA</b> Hawaii 6th -8th December	Sita Desk	Neeraj Bhatt

# Trade Shows

