



Ramble around the Ghats

Feb 19, 2025 - Mar 4, 2025

A walking holiday in South India

The Western Ghats mountain range looms large in the life of South India. Its varying height, aspect and weather have created unique landscapes and ecosystems, and consequently diverse lifestyles, livelihoods and geo-cultural identities of the people living there and in its shadow. Amazingly, within an hour's drive of the Ghats you encounter a completely different natural and human environment. It makes a truism of the idea that India is a collection of countries.

This two-week trip through Tamil Nadu and Kerala incorporates a wide variety of landscapes, food, language and customs, with delightful local characters guiding our walks and revealing the hidden meaning of all that we see.

As this is the first time we are running this tour, it will involve an element of discovery for all of us, and will suit travellers who enjoy the spontaneous encounters and experiences that come with open-ended exploring.

Trip Summary

February 19 - Day 1: Arrive Coimbatore

February 20 - Day 2: Coimbatore - Pollachi - Chinnar

Negamam Weavers Village, Pollachi

Chinnar Eco Living Farm Stay Manupatti

February 21 - Day 3: Chinnar

Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary

February 22 - Day 4: Chinnar - Munnar

Windermere Estate Munnar

February 23 - Day 5: Munnar

Top Valley Trek, Munnar

February 24 - Day 6: Munnar

Meesapulimala walk, Munnar

Letchmi Hills walk, Munnar

February 25 - Day 7: Munnar - Chinnakkanal

Spice Tree, Chinnakkanal

February 26 - Day 8: Chinnakkanal

Harrison's Estate Walk

February 27 - Day 9: Chinnakkanal - Perumparai

Rajakkad Estate

February 28 - Day 10: Perumparai

Ramble around Rajakkad Estate

March 1 - Day 11: Perumparai - Kanadukathan

Visalam

March 2 - Kanadukathan/Chettinad region

Exploring Chettinad

March 3 - Kanadukathan - Madurai

Life of Madurai and Meenakshi

March 4 - Madurai - Chennai depart

February 19 - Day 1: Arrive Coimbatore



Arrive Coimbatore. You'll be met on arrival and transferred to the hotel. Coimbatore is a convenient though lightly used international gateway and logistically an ideal tour commencement point.

If you would like to be geographically oriented as you read the itinerary open this map www.mapcustomizer.com/map/Ghats-Ramble - the 7 places on the map being the 7 places where we stay.

(No meals).

February 20 - Day 2: Coimbatore - Pollachi - Chinnar



Today we drive to Chinnar (about 3 hours) with a stop en route to visit a most interesting school and a village almost entirely dedicated to weaving. Lunch will be at a local restaurant in Pollachi.

B, L, D



Negamam Weavers Village, Pollachi

India has had a tradition of handmade textiles and handloom from ancient times. With the advent of modern technology sadly most of the traditional communities have disappeared. Here at Negamam you visit a village which has retained traditional techniques of cotton weaving. The village has been in existence for over 200 years and have been weaving cotton sarees and fabric right from the start.

The walk in the village is going back in time. You will get see households involved in various stages of textile production. It begins with the drawing and hand spinning of the fibres to form threads. Following this the yarn is dyed and dried and then fed into looms where the master craftsman weaves the sari which is the final product. On the walk you will get to see these processes as well as life in a rural village as you go.



Chinnar Eco Living Farm Stay Manupatti

Chinar Eco Living is a working fruit farm, mainly growing pomegranate and papaya among other fruit. The hotel has 6 units, all with a small plunge pool and, as the name suggests, are living spaces. Though comfortable, the units have been designed to be close to nature. The eco-friendly resort has been built with locally sourced and recycled materials. Much of the food is cooked completely from scratch and the ingredients are from the garden and plantation.

Located in a rural Tamil village, it is a great base to explore the local way of life.

<https://chinnarecoliving.com/>



February 21 - Day 3: Chinnar



This morning a short drive brings us to the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, where we do a morning walk with a tribal guide, followed by lunch.

In the afternoon we take a farm tour with resident chef/gardener Murugan, followed by a cooking demonstration.

B, L, D



Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary

Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary is a unique protected area located in the rain shadow region in the eastern slope of Western Ghats. The area is predominantly shrub jungle and riverine forest. There are several tribal villages on the periphery of the park and the guide/trackers are from these villages (it's been said that prior to the establishment of the sanctuary, the tribal communities were engaged in poaching, whereas now their main source of income is guiding and other tourism related work). The park is a well-known repository of medicinal plants and supports a healthy population of grizzled giant squirrel, star tortoise, tufted grey langur, gaur, spotted deer, slender loris, wild elephant, crocodile, tiger, leopard and many a birds, insects and plants. However mammal sightings on foot are fairly rare.

It takes about 45 minutes to get to Chinnar from our hotel. Initially the drive passes through the Anamalai Sanctuary (which is the Tamil Nadu part of the same jungle) where we may also see wildlife. We'll try to reach the sanctuary entrance at the opening time of 8 am. The walk is around 8 to 10 kms and will take us approx. 3 hours. Being low-lying and in a 'rain shadow' of the Ghats, it can be hot in this area.

Afterwards we have lunch in the canteen which is staffed by members of the nearby tribal community.

Our guide for the walk (in addition to a tracker) is Hadlee, who hails from Munnar. Hadlee's abiding passion is frogs, but his knowledge extends to all flora and fauna of this part of the Ghats.



February 22 - Day 4: Chinnar - Munnar



This morning we do a walk in the surrounding area, passing through farmlands and visiting a village and coconut processing plant. On the walk we see life in a rural Tamil village and farms. The main crop here is coconut and coconut-based products. We visit a coconut farm to see how coconut is peeled, dried and processed to make copra, which is used to make oil. In a separate unit we see how the husk is processed to make coir and coir products. We then walk through the countryside back to Chinnar Eco Living. On the walk we'll pass by other farms and primary production units which although operated on a small scale are a significant part of the rural economy.

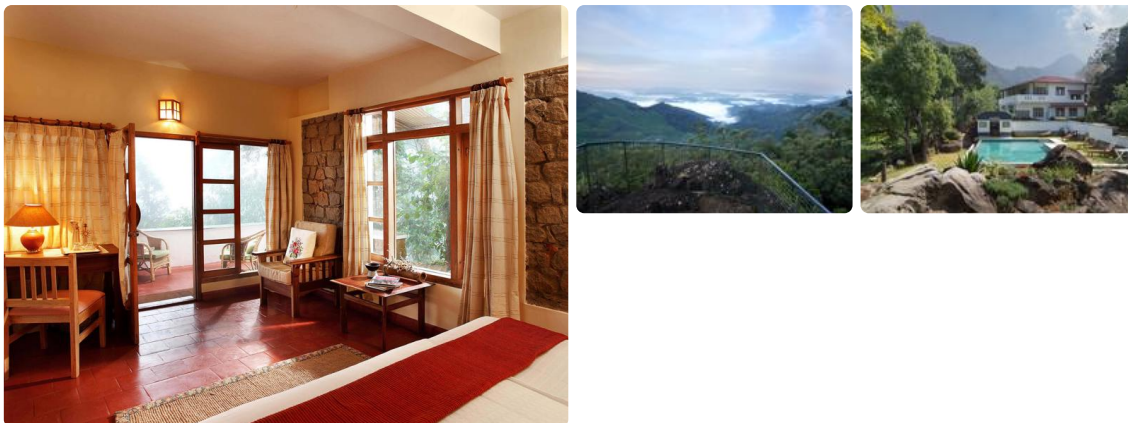
Later in the morning we depart for Munnar (about 4 hours driving) with a visit to a jaggery production unit and lunch en route.

B, L, D



Windermere Estate Munnar

Located high on Observatory Hill, Windermere Estate is surrounded by a 24-hectare cardamom plantation. The hotel has grown from the original planter's cottage to include various bungalows with different aspects and views. The large rooms have high ceilings, red cedar beams, hardwood floors polished with traditional wax and teak furniture. Cooled by the surrounding mist all day, there are no fans or air conditioners here, for none are ever required. The emphasis is on simplicity rather than embellishment and homely warmth over opulence.



February 23 - Day 5: Munnar



Today we have the first of a series of walks in the Ghats proper - the Top Valley trek. (Lunch at a local restaurant during the walk.)

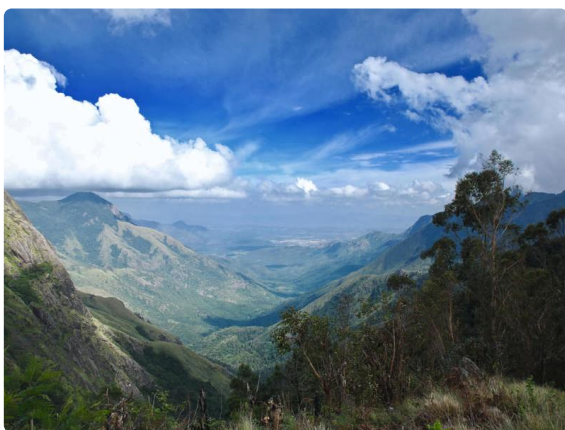
B, L, D



Top Valley Trek, Munnar

This is one of most scenic treks on offer in Munnar. We start early from our hotel and drive to Yellapetty, about an hour's drive from Munnar Town. The drive itself is one of the most scenic routes near Munnar, covering Mattupetty dam, Echo point and Kundala Dam, with a good chance of spotting wild elephants on the way. We start our walk at a village, proceeding past the 'workers lines' or homes, where you will see the people working in the fields and going about their daily chores. The path then takes us through Shola Forest, with its thick canopy and dense vegetation. The summit offers spectacular views of the surrounding hills and valleys below. We then walk down and through the tea plantations all the way to Top Station where we finish. There's a good chance to spot several species of birds endemic to this region along the way.

The walk is approx. 8 kms and will take us around 4 hours. The path is mostly well defined though as always in these sub-tropical parts can be wet and slippery. There are some slightly more technical sections but nothing that can't be managed with some careful foot placement.



February 24 - Day 6: Munnar



Today you have the choice to walk the Meesapulimala (the highest peak open to the public in south India) or do the Letchmi Hills walks in the tea plantations around Munnar, followed by a market visit and cooking class in a local home. (Picnic lunch for the Meesapulimala walk or home lunch after the cooking class.)

B, L, D



Meesapulimala walk, Munnar

Today's walk is the most challenging (and rewarding!) of the trip - Meesapulimala is South India's second-highest peak, and the highest publicly-accessible peak, standing at a height of 2,640 metres. On a clear day, the walk and summit offer superb views of the surrounding countryside and mountains.

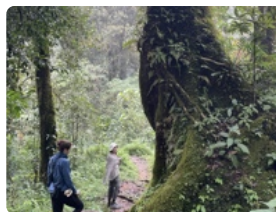
Beginning with a drive of approximately 90 minutes, we weave our way through tea plantations and eucalyptus forest by open-air jeep to reach the walk's starting point. From here we commence walking through high-altitude grassland on a good path (occasionally slippery and rocky, but mostly good condition) with at times quite pronounced undulation (ie steep up and down!). The final climb to the peak involves a steep incline, however reaching the peak, weather permitting, we will be rewarded by stunning 360 degree vistas. There is a good chance of seeing deer and a small chance of seeing the elusive Nilgiri Tahr along the way. The path returns via a different route, dropping down into the valley and taking us through forest sections and tall thick grasslands.

Typically it takes 5-6 hours (including breaks) to complete the walk, however there are turn around and get out points should anyone feel they can't finish it. Considering there are no time constraints, it is an achievable walk for anyone with decent fitness and a desire to complete it. We take regular breaks to catch our breath and enjoy the views.



Letchmi Hills walk, Munnar

The Letchmi Hills walk takes us through tea plantations and shola forest close to Munnar town. Beginning with around an hour's walking through tea plantations, we eventually climb through open grasslands to the day's first view point. The first section is a steady but manageable climb to a lovely view point, where weather permitting there are views to the surrounding hills and valleys below. The walk continues along a ridge line, which offers views of grasslands and rocky mountains on one side and tea plantations with patches of Shola forest on the other. Being the dividing range between low-lying Kerala to the east and high altitude plantations to the west, the weather can change quickly - at times clear with good visibility towards the coast, at other times densely shrouded in fog. We then gradually work our way to the highest point, traversing several knolls, before reaching the top. Here we will rest and enjoy some snacks and take in the wonderful views of Anaimudi, South India's highest peak, and Idukki Dam. Having enjoyed the views, our return walk weaves down through the forest and tea plantations to the main road, where we are met by our vehicles. Typically the walk is about 10kms and takes around 3.5 hours however the walk will be varied to suit the walkers.



February 25 - Day 7: Munnar - Chinnakkanal



There's an optional birdwatching walk around the Windermere property this morning.

After breakfast and check-out we visit Shristi NGO, a charitable trust dedicated to the generation of sustainable livelihoods for the differently-abled children & young adults of Munnar. We continue on for an hour and check-in to Spice Tree.

The afternoon is at leisure with optional activities offered by the hotel - a tea tasting session and high tea, a walk to nearby dolmens (megalithic tombs) or possibly an Ayurvedic treatment.

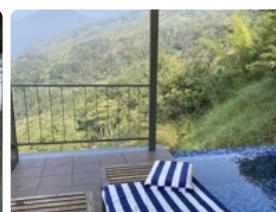
B, D



Spice Tree, Chinnakkanal

Spice Tree is located between the evergreen Kannan Devan Hills and Bison Valley Hills. The architect has made the most of the aspect and location: each of the rooms looks out over the valley, as does the dining room. A small solar-heated outdoor swimming pool and tea tasting room complete the picture.

<https://spicetreemunnar.com/>



February 26 - Day 8: Chinnakkanal



Today there is the choice of two walks: a two hour walk through cardamom plantation to the valley below the hotel (followed by the afternoon at leisure) or a longer excursion to walk through Harrison's Estate tea plantation.

B, L, D



Harrison's Estate Walk

We start today's walk at the muster where the tea pickers report for the day's duties. Here we can see the start of a typical day on a tea estate. We commence the walk in the estate where we get to know more about the history of tea and the way the estate functions. We'll come across the pickers harvesting leaves and other activities. We also walk through the "lines" - the villages where the pickers live - and visit the tea factory where we see the process from leaf to tea. We'll have a picnic lunch along the way and return to the hotel mid-afternoon.



February 27 - Day 9: Chinnakkanal - Perumparai



Today we leave the Ghats and drop down to plains of Tamil Nadu, with a dramatic change of scenery and environment in the first hour's drive. After a further hour and a half on the main road, we turn off and enter into the Kodai Hills, which geologically are an eastward extension of the Western Ghats. The last hour or so involves quite steep ascent up to our accommodation, Rajakkad Estate. We walk the last couple kilometres to the property itself (more because of the bad road than the steepness!). The total driving time is around 4 hours.

After lunch, there's free time to settle in and relax. Birds are abundant here, and there are several different sitting areas that are perfect vantage points for sightings.

In the late afternoon the property manager Sudhan takes on a short stroll through the plantation, pointing out various plants which are very common in these parts and quite exotic for us.

B, L, D



Rajakkad Estate

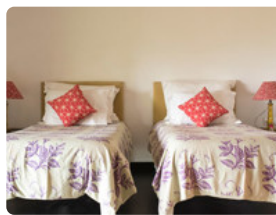
Situated at 1,000 meters above sea level and set in the foothills of the Western Ghats, Rajakkad Estate offers a sense of serenity and tranquillity. Life here has changed very little over the last century.

The house, Pallam Palace, that sits at the heart of the old Rajakkad coffee plantation is a small hotel comprising seven simple bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, set around a courtyard within an 18th century wooden building. There is an interesting story behind building - it's actually from Kerala and was pulled apart, moved here and reassembled (by an English artist, no less). It is a construction of many thousands of interlocking beams, panels and screens, sheltered by a roof canopy that appears to float above.

Whilst offering comfort, Rajakkad remains simple and authentic. All bedrooms are accessed through the main courtyard beneath the flowering trees. White wall interiors and black oxide floors offer a simple and cooling contrast to the wooden structure of the house. There is no AC, and thanks to the altitude, it is not needed.

Food is a real highlight of a stay at Rajakkad Estate. Meals are a mix of authentic home-style Tamil food and lighter Western offerings.

<http://www.rajakkadestate.com/index.php>



February 28 - Day 10: Perumparai



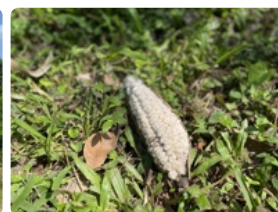
Today we do a walk through the surrounding countryside - mostly coffee plantation, with patches of beautiful old growth forest and the occasional village. After a morning's walking we'll land up in a picturesque spot for a picnic lunch. We return to the Estate and have the late afternoon at leisure.

B, L, D



Ramble around Rajakkad Estate

Today's walk is open-ended in the sense that there are many possible paths in the countryside around Rajakkad Estate. The land around the property is predominantly coffee plantation, with patches of semi-tropical forest. Though the temperature here is warmer than the main range, the majority of today's walk is shaded by the forest canopy. It is an ideal habitat for birds and other small fauna, sightings of which are helped by good sight-lines. Walking on small paths known only to locals, we'll encounter coffee pluckers and village hamlets, where we stop to chat and learn about customs, practices and the natural environment from the estate guide. At the end of the walk we'll enjoy a picnic lunch, from where you can walk or take transport back to estate property.



March 1 - Day 11: Perumparai - Kanadukathan



This morning we have a drive of about 4 hours. We leave the Kodai hills and return to the busy main road, where shops and houses line the way and there is a multitude of different vehicles - tractors, ubiquitous TVS two-wheelers, bat out of hell buses, shiny new-money cars and the occasional bullock cart. This is the thriving agricultural heartland of Tamil Nadu. There are always roadworks going on, so expect some delays.

We'll stop en route for lunch at local restaurant, for our first try of the oft-imitated but never replicated cuisine of Chettinad.

We reach the village of Kanadukathan sometime in the mid-afternoon and take it easy for the rest of the day.

For some reason/s, which I have never been able to pin down exactly, Chettinad is one of my favourite rural areas of India. Something about the combination of the food, the intriguing history of the Chettiars, the unique temples and accessibility of the cottage industries makes it such a fascinating place to spend a few days.

B, L, D



Visalam

A 1930s mansion, Visalam has been sensitively restored to something approximating its original glory. The interiors are cool and serene with their high-raftered teak ceilings, traditional egg plaster walls, handmade tiled floors, shuttered windows and Art Deco furniture.

A feature of a stay here is the opportunity to enjoy Chettinad cuisine - famous in India, but still relatively unknown outside it. This is one of the country's spiciest and most aromatic cuisines. Leisure time can be spent relaxing by the swimming pool, on the veranda or under the bougainvillea.



March 2 - Kanadukathan/Chettinad region



Today we explore the land of the Chettiars by bike or e-bike. If you aren't comfortable riding, the program can be done by vehicle.

In the late afternoon there is the option to take a walk through the village of Kanadukathan (where our hotel is located) to get a closer look at the glorious Chettinad mansions, which are in various states of health/decline.

B, L, D



Exploring Chettinad

Chettinad is the homeland of the Nattukottai Chettiars, a prosperous banking and business community, many of whose members migrated to South and Southeast Asia, particularly Ceylon and Burma in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Chettiars lavished their fortunes on building opulent mansions in the 75 towns and villages of their arid rural homeland, Chettinadu. No expense was spared on finding the finest materials for these palatial homes. Construction materials, decorative items, and furnishings were mostly imported from East Asian countries and Europe. (The marble was brought from Italy, chandeliers and teak from Burma, crockery from Indonesia, crystals from Europe and wall-to-wall mirrors from Belgium).

After World War II, the Chettiars' businesses and fortunes declined. Many families left the region, and disused mansions decayed and were demolished or sold. Awareness of their value started to revive around the turn of the 21st century, with Chettinad being added on to UNESCO's tentative World Heritage list in 2014. Several mansions have now been converted into gorgeous heritage hotels that are some of Tamil Nadu's best.

In addition to being famous for its 19th-century mansions, the region is well known for its rich cultural heritage, art and architecture, cottage industries, temples and cuisine.

During the course of the ride we'll visit an Athungudi tile making unit, which is a very distinct method and style of making tiles; a traditional basket weaving unit; a women's co-operative where they make sweets and savoury snacks; and a local temple. We'll be out for the morning and finish with lunch at a local restaurant, after which there is the option to ride back to the hotel or return by vehicle.



March 3 - Kanadukathan - Madurai



Life of Madurai and Meenakshi

This morning is a relatively shorter travel day - about 2.5 hours of driving brings us to Madurai. A busier and more go-ahead city you will not find. The complete cacophony of the functional/dysfunctional small Indian city is perfectly embodied here. In the afternoon we set out on foot to experience this by mixing in with daily-life activities, sampling some locally-popular street food and more generally learning about the city's history, first-hand. The walk ends at the Meenakshi temple, one of the largest temple complexes in India.

B, D



March 4 - Madurai - Chennai depart



We visit the flower market early this morning. It's a fitting end to the colourful and lively two weeks in South India together.

After breakfast, there is time and transport available for some shopping, in case that's of interest (this being one of the only places in the itinerary where shopping is possible). Those of the group not up for shopping can seek out Madurai's best filter coffee (it's famous for it) and drink in a few last flavours of the south.

In the afternoon we have a flight to Chennai to connect with evening international departures, or onward travel to elsewhere in India.

B

Information & Documents



Pricing and inclusions

\$7765 per person twin share

Please enquire about single room price and availability

Included:

- 13 night's accommodation*
- All breakfasts and dinners, most lunches (as indicated)
- All transfers, touring and sightseeing by air-conditioned Tempo Traveller
- Internal flight: Madurai to Chennai in economy class including 15 kg check-in luggage
- Tour host (Lincoln) and accompanying English speaking tour escort/guide and local guides
- All activities as outlined including entrance fees
- Tips
- Indian visa
- All land and vehicle taxes

Not included:

- International flights
- Personal expenses (eg drinks, laundry)

- Camera fees (rarely applicable)

*We can book additional nights before and/or after the tour to suit different arrival and departure times/dates

Preparation, transport and on-tour support

Preparation

We provide extensive information to enable you to prepare well for the trip. This includes practical information about weather, suggested/required gear, food and health, physical preparation/fitness, money etc. We will conduct an online briefing with the group around 45 days prior. In addition I am available any time to answer questions in the lead up.

Transport

We have 2 x 8-seater Tempo Travellers for this tour. This gives everyone a window seat and plenty of personal space and room for luggage. We travel in convoy with communication between the vehicles allowing us to stop as necessary.

Walks and flexibility

We've given an indication of walking distances, terrain and track condition, however this is meant to be indicative rather than definitive. The walks can be modified (ie shortened or lengthened) to some degree (within practical and logistical constraints). In some cases we will have a third (local) guide with us, in which case we can split into two parties, giving greater scope to modify walks.

In general this sort of trip is more rewarding when approached with an open mind and a willingness to be flexible - the most interesting experiences in India are often the unplanned ones - and these experiences can only occur when we open up time for them.

About your hosts

Lincoln Harris

My work and life story is completely entwined with India. After visiting as a 16 year old, I made it my mission to return to India as often as I could. Eventually I needed help to sustain the habit, and with that a travel enterprise was born. Since then, over the course of nearly 25 years, I have travelled, worked, run businesses and social enterprises and raised a family in India. Introducing people to India - its beauty but also contradictions - has been my abiding personal and professional passion. Covid was a reminder not to take international travel for granted, and I am thrilled to be leading groups in India again.



Fundraising for Wonderkids School

For each tour participant, India Unbound will contribute \$500 to social enterprise The Dignity Project, supporting education and women's health in rural India. Currently the project is supporting Wonderkids School in Khajuraho and a sanitary pad distribution program in the area. India Unbound has had a long association with Wonderkids. Over Covid, India Unbound become the major sponsor of the school, including regular visits by staff and supporters to support the school to implement programs aimed at encouraging students to return to school post-Covid. These programs include establishing a computer lab, a breakfast program and renovating the classrooms. With the support of The Dignity Project the school is shifting to a larger premises in 2024 and expanding to middle school.

