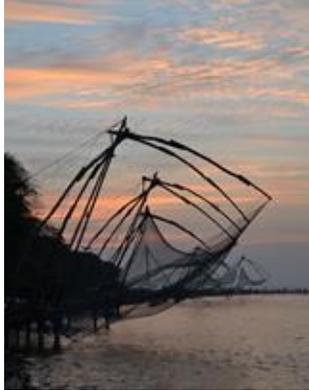




## KarmaQuest Ecotourism and Adventure Travel

### South India – A Gentle Side of India



You've been to India -- seen the Taj Mahal, done Delhi, and loved Rajasthan's glitz and romance. You've checked it off your bucket list. But wait. South India is quite different - - as different as Los Angeles is from San Francisco, as New Orleans is from Chicago...

The people of India characterize the differences as climatic, cultural, linguistic, culinary, architectural, and by nature. Some say South India is cleaner, greener (as in the vegetation) and wetter and thus seemingly more prosperous; people are

more widely educated, and there is a multi-European heritage that shows in the buildings and economies (*right: Vasco da Gama, who ushered in the Dutch in 1502; and his namesake*).



### Of Ancient Dravidian Origin

One of the basic differences between the north and the south is the people. The people of South India are classified as Dravidian: aboriginal peoples thought to have pre-dated the arrival of Aryans who populate most of the north.

### Beliefs and Festivals

As throughout India, people of South India practice Hinduism, Islam, Christianity (particularly along the coasts), Judaism (the synagogue in Cochin is the oldest in the Commonwealth), as well as Jainism and Buddhism.

Lively religious and cultural festivals run year-round. Pongal, the South Indian harvest festival held in January, is a favorite for Tamils and visitors alike in part because of the cooler climate that time of year. Celebrants don new clothes and draw colorful motifs with colored rice flour in front of their houses. Cattle are decorated and pampered during this time (*left*). A sweet made from the first rice harvest is cooked with *ghee* into a dish known as Pongal.



### A Winter Destination

November through February are the best months to visit South India when it is cooler on the coasts and chilly on high. January features the Pongal festival. March-April promise floral displays. Bird watching is best from September to April. Wildlife viewing months is possible year round (e.g., October to June at Periyar, April to October at Bandipur).



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### **Sounds and Flavors**

Tamil and Malayalam, widely spoken in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively, seem to have an inordinate number of vowels to consonants. A typical Malayalam word seems to roll off the tongue like a stream of water bouncing down a ladder.

A typical South Indian meal consists of *sambhar* (a thin, spicy tomato soup-like curry) served with *idli* (lentil cakes), or paper-thin rice flour pancakes (*dosa*) stuffed with curried potatoes or other fillings. Coconut is widely used in cooking: grated into curries, in salads, sweets, or as the basis of chutneys. Curried vegetables are

enhance the flavor and perhaps even for good health, and certainly saving on dish-washing.



### **Carved and Colorful Pyramids**

The ancient stone temples – dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries – are magnificent to behold, with details *bas relief* images and stone sculptures that have weathered the harsh monsoon rains and beating sun for millennia (*Mahabalipuram, left*).

The spectacular Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai, occupying some 45 acres in the heart of this 2,500 year old city. There are some 33,000 sculptures in the temple. The sensation of walking through this darkened, high ceiling stone edifice at night as scores of pilgrims wait to see the re-enactment of the marriage of Lord Shiva and Parvati, is

unforgettable. (Photos not allowed)



A common feature of the temples is the *gopuram*, a tall four-sided conical “gate,” whose exteriors are densely covered with figures of deities, kings, dancers, and warriors, painted in bright pastel colors (*right*). A visual circus!



### **Diverse Flora and Fauna**

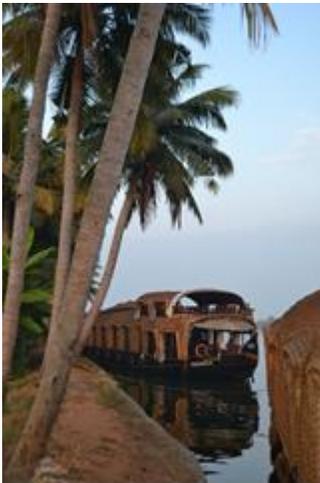
The Western Ghats (the chain of hills that run along the western edge of South India) are considered among the world’s biodiversity hotspots. High rainfall feeds rain forests and a unique mosaic of montane forests and rolling grasslands above about 4,500 feet. The region’s complex geography produces a large variety of vegetation types with over 5,000 species of flowering plants.



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Botanical and wildlife reserves laid out by the British Raj set the stage for some amazing nature spotting experiences. Wildlife hunters-turned conservationists help track the rare Bengal Tiger at Bandipur in a successful tiger protection program.

Spice plantations and tea gardens, as well as the cultivation and production of *ayurvedic* (medicinal) plants, support a thriving agricultural industry while spa resorts make use of the indigenous knowledge of *ayurveda*. Massages using *ayurvedic* oils and treatments are not only heavenly but therapeutic. (*The nutmeg seed surrounded by the red casing, mace, right*).



### **An Artist's Palette and Giving Back**

A lively cultural landscape features the colors, music, dance, theatre, and lifestyles of a variety of peoples. The European architecture of port city Cochin (Kochi) paints a colorful stage for the Kathakali traditional dance dramas. An overnight stay on a traditional *ketuvallom* (deluxe straw houseboat) on the back-canals of Allepey (*left*), and a family homestay (*below*) introduce riverside village and farm life.

As always, KarmaQuest looks for ways to contribute to the betterment of local people's lives. Here, we donated to a nearby girls' home to help build a new water system, and group members are supporting college education for several of the girls, helping them fulfil their dreams of becoming doctors, social workers, and scientists.

