



CHRISTMAS IN KERALA

2024 - Classic Tour | 16 Days | Physical Level 2

Chennai - Pondicherry - Velankanni - Madurai - Periyar - Munnar - Kochi - Backwaters

Embark on a captivating and Christmasy journey through Kerala, southern India. Starting in Chennai, explore historical sites before heading to Pondicherry for rickshaw rides and tranquility at Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Witness the Basilica of Lady of Good Health, explore vibrant markets in Madurai, and experience the beauty of Lake Periyar and Munnar's tea plantations. Celebrate Christmas with an Oriental Orthodox Mass in Kochi, embracing new festive traditions and enjoying a special Christmas day lunch. Conclude the adventure with a Kathakali dance performance in Kochi and a serene backwaters cruise in Kerala, blending cultural richness with breathtaking landscapes.

- Enjoy a rickshaw ride In the French Quarter of Pondicherry
- Witness the Arti ceremony at the Shri Minakshi Temple
- Watch a culturally significant Kalaripayattu performance
- Taste the delicious blends of tea in Munnar
- Dress in traditional attire when attending mass on Christmas Day
- Cruise the backwaters on a local houseboat

TOUR MAP



CHRISTMAS IN KERALA TOUR INCLUSIONS:

- Return international economy flights, taxes and current fuel surcharges (unless a land only option is selected)
- All accommodation
- All meals
- All sightseeing and entrance fees
- All transportation and transfers
- English speaking National Escorts (if your group is 10 or more passengers) or Local Guides
- Specialist advice from our experienced travel consultants
- India visa fees for New Zealand passport holders (please see visa section below for further information)
- Safe and secure with IATA

The only thing you may have to pay for are personal expenditure e.g. drinks, optional excursions or shows, insurance of any kind, customary tipping, meals not included, early check in or late check out and other items not specified on the itinerary.

CLASSIC TOURS:

These tours are designed for those who wish to see the iconic sites and magnificent treasures of India on an excellent value group tour whilst travelling with like-minded people. The tours are on a fully-inclusive basis so you'll travel with the assurance that all your arrangements are taken care of.

You will be accompanied by our dedicated and professional National Escorts and local guides, whose unparalleled knowledge will turn your holiday into an unforgettable experience.

PHYSICAL LEVEL 2:

All our tours feature a physical rating to help you select the right holiday for you. To travel on any of our tours requires unaided mobility and the ability to stroll around the sights. 'Christmas in Kerala' is rated 2 on the physical level scale. A reasonable level of fitness is required but it's more about spending time on your feet rather than covering large distances. You'll be getting on and off coaches and trains, walking around the sights and climbing some steps.

- There will be sightseeing on foot for both short and extended periods of time
- Sightseeing at nearly all the palaces, fortresses and some temples involves
- climbing several steps, often without handrails
- You will be required to get on and off a rickshaw

Of course, our National Escorts and local guides will always endeavour to provide the highest level of service and assistance; however, they cannot be expected to cater for customers who are unfit to complete the itinerary. If you require any more information about the pace of our tours, please contact our reservations team who will be happy to answer your questions.

JOINING YOUR TOUR:

The tour is 16 days in duration including overnight international flights, as this is the most likely flight option from New Zealand.

Join the tour on Day 2 in Chennai and end the tour on Day 15 also in Kochi. Please refer to your final itinerary for more specific meeting instructions pertaining to your departure.

ITINERARY CHANGES:

It's our intention to adhere to the day-to-day itinerary as printed; however, the order of events or sightseeing may change as we look to improve our tours or as local conditions dictate. In these circumstances we'll make the best possible arrangements maintaining the integrity of your trip.

DETAILED ITINERARY

Days 1-2: Arrive Chennai

Meals: D

Upon arrival into Chennai, where on arrival you will be met and transferred to your hotel. You have the rest of the day at leisure before meeting your fellow travellers for dinner.



Destination Information

Chennai - The capital city of the state of Tamil Nadu, is a vibrant metropolis on the southeastern coast of India. Known for its rich cultural heritage, Chennai seamlessly blends tradition with modernity. The city boasts architectural marvels, including the iconic Marina Beach, historic landmarks such as Fort St. George, and cultural hubs like Kapaleeswarar Temple.

Day 3: Chennai City Tour

Meals: B, L, D

Your festive adventure in Southern India begins! Start at the iconic Marina Beach, where you can stand with the sand between your toes, the sun on your face and the Christmas spirit in your soul!

Next, delve into the historical significance of Fort St. George, a colonial-era fortress that houses the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly and the St. Mary's Church, the oldest Anglican church in India.



Continue your journey to the Kapaleeswarar Temple, a sacred Dravidian-style Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, where the intricate architecture and spiritual ambiance create a captivating experience. Today's touring will last approximately 4 hours.

Destination Information

Fort St. George - Established in 1644 by the British East India Company, it was the first English fortress in India. The fort served as a crucial base for British expansion in the region and played a pivotal role in the history of Chennai (formerly Madras).

Kapaleeswarar Temple - A renowned Hindu temple located in the Mylapore neighborhood of Chennai, and dedicated to Lord Shiva. This temple is an architectural marvel and a significant religious and cultural landmark in the city.

Day 4: Travel to Pondicherry

Meals: B, L, D

After breakfast you will depart for Pondicherry, stopping 1h50 minutes enroute at the Mahabalipuram rock carvings. These ancient rock-cut sculptures, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, showcase intricately carved depictions of Hindu mythology and ancient Indian art.



Continue your journey to Pondicherry, where you will spend the night. Today's journey will last 4 -5 hours.

Destination Information

Mahabalipuram Rock Carvings – Mahabalipuram, also known as Mamallapuram, is renowned for its exquisite rock monuments and sculptures that showcase the artistic brilliance of ancient Indian craftsmanship. The Mahabalipuram Rock Carvings are a collection of intricately carved structures that date back to the 7th and 8th centuries during the Pallava dynasty.

Pondicherry - A coastal town with a unique blend of French and Indian influences on the southeastern coast of India. Known for its serene beaches, Pondicherry offers a distinctive cultural experience. The town is celebrated for its colonial architecture, vibrant markets, and a tranquil ambiance that attracts visitors seeking a blend of history and spirituality.

Day 5: Explore Pondicherry

Meals: B, L, D

Explore Pondicherry's spiritual essence at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, then uncover the region's history at the Pondicherry Museum.



Take in the unique charm of the French quarter with a delightful rickshaw ride, followed by free time to wander through its colorful streets, revealing a perfect blend of French and Indian influences. You'll be sightseeing for 3 - 4 hours.

Destination Information

Sri Aurobindo Ashram – This is a spiritual community and the centre of integral yoga founded by Sri Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa, known as The Mother. Established in 1926, the ashram attracts spiritual seekers from around the world.

Day 6: Drive to Velankanni

Meals: B, L, D

Today you will travel south, driving approximately 5 hours to Velankanni.

Lunch will be in Chidambaram. On arrival you will check in at your hotel before a visit to the revered Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health. Also known as Vailankanni Church, this is a major pilgrimage site, where its significance lies in the belief that it is a place of miraculous healing. Devotees from various faiths visit to seek blessings and offer prayers to the Virgin Mary. This excursion will last approximately 1.5 - 2 hours.



Please dress conservatively when visiting the Basilica - Both men and women must cover their legs and head, and no sleeveless shirts allowed.

Destination Information

The Basilica of Our Lady of Good hope – Characterized by its distinctive architecture and serene ambiance. It consists of multiple chapels, prayer halls, and an imposing Gothic-style main church. The shrine is adorned with numerous ex-votos and testimonials, illustrating the gratitude of those who believe their prayers have been answered.

Day 7: Travel to Madurai

Meals: B, L, D

Set off after breakfast on a 5-hour drive to Madurai, detouring through Chettinad. Explore the rich cultural heritage of this region by visiting a tile-making factory, witnessing the intricate process of tile production.

Continue by visiting a traditional house, a testament to the architectural and cultural legacy of the region, before exploring the local market.



Resume your drive to Madurai, where you'll check in at the hotel upon arrival. Today's sightseeing lasts 1.5 - 2 hours.

Destination Information

Chettinad – A region in the Sivaganga district of Tamil Nadu, that is renowned for its unique cultural and architectural heritage, as well as its cuisine.

Madurai - One of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the Indian subcontinent, is a vibrant and culturally rich city in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Day 8: Madurai City Tour

Meals: B, L, D

Explore the cultural treasures of this city with a visit to the iconic Meenakshi Amman Temple, dedicated to Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar.

Next, delve into the regal history of Madurai by visiting the Thirumalai Nayakkar Palace. As the day unfolds, experience the mesmerizing Aarti ceremony at the Meenakshi Temple, joining the devotees in the evening ritual, where lamps are lit, prayers are offered, and the divine energy of the temple is palpable. Sightseeing today will last 4 - 5 hours.

**Destination Information**

Meenakshi Amman Temple – A historic Hindu Temple located on the southern bank of the Vaigai River and said to date back as far as the 4th century CE, but its present form, built in the 16th - 17th centuries, has it enclosed in high walls.

Thirumalai Nayakkar Palace - Erected In 1636 CE, this 17th century palace was the main palace in which the king lived.

Day 9: Periyar National Park

Meals: B, L, D

Your drive to Periyar this morning will take approximately 3h20 minutes. Embark on a scenic drive where along the way you will visit a local spice village and market.

Continue to Periyar and, in the evening, witness the ancient and dynamic Kalaripayattu martial arts show. This traditional martial art form, originating in Kerala, is characterized by its fluid movements, precise techniques, and a deep connection to the region's cultural heritage. Marvel at the skilled performers as they showcase this ancient art form, demonstrating a captivating blend of strength, agility, and discipline. Spend 1.5 hours sightseeing today.

**Destination Information**

Periyar National Park – Also known as Periyar Tiger Reserve, this park is home to tigers, elephants, rare lion-tailed macaques, sambar deer and Indian bison.

Day 10: Boat ride on Lake Periyar

Meals: B, L, D

Begin your day with a serene morning boat ride on Lake Periyar, surrounded by the lush greenery of the Periyar National Park. As you navigate the tranquil waters, be on the lookout for diverse wildlife that frequents the lake, including elephants, deer, and various bird species.

Following the boat ride, you will continue to Munnar, taking approximately 4 - 4.5 hours. Munnar is renowned for its verdant landscapes, tea estates, and cool climate, making it a popular hill station in South India.

**Destination Information**

Munnar – A town in the Western Ghats Mountain range, surrounded by rolling hills dotted with tea plantations established in the late 19th century.

Day 11: Tour Munnar

Meals: B, L, D

Embark on a morning visit to Eravikulam National Park, as you enjoy a light trek through Munnar, taking in the fresh mountain air and the scenic beauty of the park.

Following this delve into the world of tea with a visit to a local tea plantation in Munnar. Gain insights into the tea-making process, from plucking the leaves to processing and packaging. Learn about the nuances of tea cultivation and appreciate the picturesque surroundings of the tea estates.

Your day will conclude with a visit to the Tata Tea Museum, where you can explore the history of tea cultivation in the region. Discover the evolution of Munnar's tea industry and enjoy interactive exhibits showcasing the tea-making journey. Touring today lasts 4 - 5 hours.

**Day 12: Travel to Kochi**

Meals: B, L, D

Today, Christmas Eve, you head 5 hours to Kochi, a city known for its rich history and cultural diversity. To get you into the Christmas spirit this evening, indulge in a festive dinner at the hotel, savouring the flavors of Kerala's culinary delights as you celebrate the season with your travel companions.

Later, immerse yourself in the vibrant and unique Christmas traditions of Kerala by attending a traditional midnight mass at an Oriental Orthodox Church. Experience the joyous celebrations, melodious carols, and the heartwarming atmosphere as the community comes together to commemorate the season. The midnight mass in Kerala is a special occasion marked by cultural richness, religious fervor, and a sense of togetherness.



Destination Information

Kochi – Also known as Cochin, this is a small city within Kerala state. Home to many religious sites and the renowned Chinese fishing nets.

Day 13: Christmas Day

Meals: B, L, D

Merry Christmas! Today promises to be a wonderful experience as you immerse yourself in the vibrant culture, for a day filled with festive and cultural experiences in the lovely sunshine. Dress up in traditional Keralan attire and attend the Christmas Mass at St. Francis Church before a city tour of Kochi, visiting the Santa Cruz Basilica, a beautiful church with Portuguese origins. Explore the Jewish Synagogue, Chinese fishing nets along the waterfront and take a stroll through nearby markets.



Enjoy Christmas brunch and all the festivities at your hotel.

For a particular fun Christmas evening, later you will proceed to the Kathakali Dance auditorium for an enriching cultural experience, where you will spend approximately 45 minutes witnessing the intricate preparations before enjoying a captivating Kathakali dance performance, where the artists showcase the artistry and storytelling through elaborate costumes, facial expressions, and rhythmic movements.

Day 14: Houseboat on Boxing Day

Meals: B, L, D

A Boxing Day with a difference, transfer 1h30 minutes to the Alleppey Jetty Point to board a traditional houseboat. Cruise through the picturesque canals of the backwaters of Kerala. Along the way, make stops to explore small villages, visit charming churches, and discover ancient temples, absorbing the rich cultural tapestry of the region.



As the houseboat moors in the evening, partake in a special evening filled with the enchanting rhythms of Folk Music and Dances.

Day 15-16: Disembark Houseboat and fly to New Zealand

Meals: B, L

After breakfast, you will disembark from your houseboat and transfer 1h30 back to Kochi, where you will enjoy lunch.

Later spend time visiting local markets, before transfer to the airport for your overnight flight back to New Zealand



CHRISTMAS IN KERALA TRAVEL INFORMATION

VISAS:

Entry visas are required by all visitors to India and Wendy Wu Tours can assist you with the process of obtaining a visa. Please be advised that your passport must have at least six months validity left on it when you arrive back to New Zealand.

Please note the visa procedures and requirements may change at any time. These changes are often made by the relevant embassy or consulate; Wendy Wu Tours acts as a third party and has no influence on the process of a visa. Your travel consultant will inform you if any changes are applicable prior to your departure.

INSURANCE:

We strongly recommend that you take out a policy as soon as you pay your deposit. Wendy Wu Tours cannot in any way be made liable for any additional cost incurred by the customer on any tour due to the customer not having adequate travel insurance. We also encourage all customers to take a copy of their travel insurance documents (especially relevant international contact numbers) with them while on tour. We advise that you check the inclusions and procedures for lodging claims prior to your departure. These documents should be stored separately from the original.

EATING IN INDIA:

Indian cuisine is one of the most influential, diverse and flavoursome culinary styles in the world. Indian dishes incorporate many spices and seasoning to create an explosion of flavours. Though Indian cuisine can vary greatly from the Indian food we get in New Zealand, it is important to keep an open mind and be adventurous. All meals (excluding drinks) are included in our classic group tours, from dinner on the arrival day until breakfast on the day of departure. Please be aware that dishes selected for your meals reflect the cooking styles and signature dishes of the local area you are in.

Dishes served in restaurants on our group tours are varied. Some will be vegetable-based with meat mixed in, and a few will be meat-based. Our restaurants are well aware of the western palate – there are plenty of non-spiced options. When eating meals on group tours, you will usually be seated around a large table with other tour members. Dishes will be served in the traditional ‘family style’; meaning that various dishes will be laid out in the centre of the table. These dishes are intended to be shared amongst the group – there is always more than enough to feed everybody.

Please read your travel guide, which you will receive with your final documents for more information about eating in India. We recommend that when it comes to Indian food, you stay open minded and try to be adventurous!

**PLEASE INFORM US OF ANY ALLERGIES AND/OR SPECIAL DIETARY REQUIREMENTS
AT TIME OF BOOKING**

DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA:

Although India is developing quickly, it still lacks the international standards of civil infrastructure and tourist facilities. Concepts of personal responsibility are also different to New Zealand. Consequently, tourist and public facilities may not uphold the same safety standards as in New Zealand; for example, you may see a hole in the road without a warning sign or safety barricade. All of our suppliers meet local safety standards as a minimum. We want you to have an enjoyable holiday so we ask that you take extra care, use your common sense, refer to notices and follow advice from your National Escort or Local Guides.

ACCOMMODATION:

All group tour hotels have private western bathroom facilities, TV, and a telephone. Plumbing and electricity supplies can be erratic and quite often the power in hotel rooms is turned off while guests are out of the room. If you experience any difficulty, please speak to your Local Guide or National Escort.

Your accommodation has been selected for convenience of location, comfort, or character, and can range from a business hotel in one city to a family-run guesthouse in a smaller town or a heritage-type hotel. In remote areas, accommodation may be of a lower standard and may not have western amenities. Hotels are generally rated as local three to four-star standard but do please note that there is no international classification system for hotels and differences in facilities and quality do exist between New Zealand and India. Rest assured that all hotels used by Wendy Wu Tours are regularly inspected by our staff and our partners to ensure that standards are met. Please be aware that there are heightened security measures being carried out at all hotels, on guests and vehicles entering the properties.

SOUVENIRS:

We want to be able to give you an opportunity to buy souvenirs so we include some stops at museums or exhibitions that demonstrates a craft or product unique to that region with pieces available to buy. We understand that souvenir hunting is not for everyone, so we aim to take you to places that hold local interest. We trust you will enjoy these opportunities to learn about local arts and crafts and understand their historical and cultural importance.

TIPPING POLICY:

Tipping while on holiday is common in most parts of the world and India is no exception. However, it is not always clear who it is appropriate to tip and how much. Furthermore, travellers may not have the right amounts of cash available at the right time. In order to avoid any inconvenience Wendy Wu Tours operates a tipping policy where a stated amount is given to your national escort at the beginning of your tour and tips are disbursed amongst your main service providers (for example local guides and drivers) throughout your tour. The amount is designed to be at a reasonable level for travellers while being fair to the local people and includes a gratuity for the national escort.

Any other tipping, such as tips for bathroom attendants or hotel porters that are taking luggage to your room, is at your discretion based on satisfaction of services received, as are gratuities for additional requested special services.

We generally find that most customers appreciate the convenience of our tipping policy but we do recognize that it may not suit everyone. However, as this is a group tour we ask that everyone follows the same protocol to be fair to other group members and to ensure smooth operation of your tour.

EXCHANGING CASH:

US Dollars can be easily exchanged in India, provided notes are new and undamaged. We suggest exchanging your money before travelling to remote areas and smaller towns, as exchange facilities can be limited. Try and keep some small notes and coins on you, as on street stalls and in small shops they may not have the change to break up a high denomination note. If you decide to use US dollars, make sure they are in a good state (not ripped, etc.) or they will not be accepted. ATMs are common across India and we recommend using an ATM inside a bank where possible. Most major credit cards are widely accepted across the continent, though please bear in mind the charges of your provider. Debit cards are also widely accepted but may have a limit to the amount of cash you can withdraw – consult your bank about this before travelling.

PERSONAL EXPENSES AND OPTIONAL TOURINGS:

Personal Expense - You will need to take some extra money to cover drinks, laundry and souvenirs, plus any additional sightseeing that may be offered to you.

Optional Tours - May be offered in each city you visit during your tour. These are not included in the standard itinerary and will only be available if time permits and if seats are available.

Please ensure you have additional funds available if you feel you may wish to participate in any extra activities. Each option will be arranged locally by your National Escort/Local Guide, participation and tipping for optional excursions is completely at your discretion.

TRANSPORT:

Coaches: Coaches with air conditioning are used on our group tours for city sightseeing, short excursions to the countryside and longer transfers where necessary. Main and inner-city roads in India have a reputation for being very congested. For this reason, it may not always be possible to return to your hotel after sightseeing to freshen up before going to the restaurant for dinner. Roads in India have generally been improved over recent years, but traffic and/or weather conditions may extend driving times. Road construction work usually covers an enormous section of road - not just one or two kilometres as you may be used to. For this reason, the timings listed in the sections above are approximations only.

APPROPRIATE DRESS:

When visiting temples or mosques, both men and women should dress in conservative, non-revealing clothing. Full-length trousers with a shirt or t-shirt for men; and trousers or skirts well below the knee with a top that covers the shoulders and upper arms for women. Women might also consider carrying a 'modesty shawl' in their daypack – this could be a sarong or light scarf – which they can wear over their shoulders and heads to feel more comfortable while sightseeing at mosques. When visiting Jain temples, you must not wear or take in any leather items such as belts, watches, camera straps, purses and shoes.

Religious sites and homes throughout India – for Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims or Buddhists to name a few – require all visitors to remove their shoes to enter. Even if you then need to walk outdoors, over hot or rough ground, you will not be allowed to wear shoes. You will often find shoe storage rooms near the entrance of a site where it is customary to leave your shoes near the entrance. Occasionally there are 'shoe minders' who will offer to keep your shoes safe for a 'tip' – this is not compulsory so each customer can choose to tip for this service or not. If you do not want to remove your shoes, you will have to remain outside.

We recommend shoes that easily slip on and off, and carry a pair of thick, old socks in your daypack, which you can wear to protect your feet from any rough or hot surfaces.

CLIMBING STEPS:

Sightseeing at nearly all of the palaces, fortresses and some temples involves climbing quite a number of steps.

These palaces were built to provide defense against potential invaders so nearly all of them stand on top of a hill, while the interiors have layers of narrow hallways and steps to slow down the advance of enemies once they were inside. The steps tend to be quite large, not level and sometimes without handrails. Hindu and Buddhist temples or pagodas also tend to be built at an elevation, as this is the most auspicious position according to ancient beliefs. This means you sometimes need to walk from the bus park to the entrance, and/or need to climb some steps inside.

People with knee or hip injuries, who have poor balance or are otherwise unable to complete these activities independently should consider the suitability of this itinerary carefully.

VACCINATIONS AND YOUR HEALTH:

We recommend that you contact either your doctor or Health centre for advice on vaccinations and travel health. Safetravel has a comprehensive website that you may also find useful www.safetravel.govt.nz

BEFORE YOU LEAVE:

We strongly recommend registering your travel plans with www.safetravel.govt.nz as in the event of an emergency, New Zealand Consular assistance will be more readily available.

Up until the day you travel, it is vital you keep up to date and familiarised with the entry requirements as these can change at short notice. You are personally responsible for completing any entry forms, conducting any covid tests (if necessary), etc and adhering to countries' specific entry requirements.

You can also access the New Zealand Government's travel advisory service for up-to-date information about your destination on the same website.

AFTER YOUR BOOKING:

Once you have booked with Wendy Wu Tours, you will receive a confirmation invoice including a visa application form (if applicable), and a help sheet. Your final documentation pack will be sent to you approximately 2-3 weeks prior to departure.

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