

South Indian  
Cultural Retreat  
2006

Friday 17 November -  
Friday 8 December 2006

**Experience India for three weeks in a tropical Indian  
village setting in Kerala**

Learn about Indian culture and traditions in the Vijnana Kala Vedi cultural centre which teaches a wide range of subjects – yoga, Karnatic vocal music, Indian musical instruments, wood carving, mural painting, Kalaripayat, Mohiniattam, Kathakali, Bharatha Natyam, Aryurveda, and vegetarian cooking. Eat delicious banana-leaf food in the heart of Kerala. The retreat includes two weekend getaways – an idyllic backwater boat trip, and a trip to a highland resort on the Western Ghats to indulge in the leisure pursuits of the Raj.

Retreat package costs with twin share accommodation - approx \$3,800 – (to be confirmed, depending upon taxes and excluding travel insurance, which is mandatory for the trip)

Expressions of Interest and enquiries: [vsarma@bigpond.com](mailto:vsarma@bigpond.com);  
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## South Indian Retreat 2006

This retreat is for the discerning traveler who would like to understand, appreciate and practice South Indian culture in a relaxed environment on locale. Please note that you are welcome to come on the retreat just for the relaxation and ambience (without delving into any particular subject). This boutique retreat package includes:

- Airline tickets Sydney-Kochi return at economy class
  - All taxes and visas
  - Hotel accommodation at Kochi
- Travel to the Vijnana Kala Vedi (VKV) from Kochi and back
  - All meals and accommodation at the VKV
  - Tuition fees for two subjects of choice
    - Kathakali performance at VKV
    - Lecture-demonstration on Kathakali
  - Backwater boat trip (including transfers)
- Weekend accommodation at a hill station (including transfers)
  - Travel to hill station and back to VKV
    - Cultural tips and advice
  - Travel Insurance (costed separately)

### Time of year

November–December sees the end of the monsoons and the harvest season is beginning. This is the best time to visit South India with temperatures in the 20s (Centigrade). It is very pleasant and the evenings are cool and breezy in the village of Aranmula in Kerala. The Vijnana Kala Vedi Center is situated near the Pampa river. There are a number of surrounding temples which hold cultural performances and ritual events at this time of the year. On the Pampa River the snake (naga) boat races take place at Onam (harvest festival) time, when hundreds of oarsmen row traditional boats to the rhythm of drums and cymbals. These long graceful Snake Boats called 'Chundans' are named after their exceedingly long hulls and high sterns that resemble the raised hood of a cobra.

### About Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Centre



Vijnana Kala Vedi (VKV) is located near Aranmula near the coast half way between Kochi and Trivandram. The Centre, founded by Ms. Louba Schild, a Russian artist living in Kerala since 1968, has been introducing foreign visitors to Indian arts since 1977. The objective of the Centre has been to preserve and promote the traditional arts of Kerala, and maintaining their vitality. Organisations such as UNESCO and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) have been sending students and scholars to learn at Vijnana Kala Vedi for many years. It offers clean comfortable accommodation, with Western-style en-suite bathrooms, and vegetarian meals cooked Keralan-style and served on banana leaves. The campus comprises a number of houses scattered through the village and a bus connects the centre with the town of Aranmula, where there are banking, postal, hairdressing, tailoring services and shops. Special Kathakali performances are put on especially for guests and Ayurvedic massages are available on request. The teachers are professional Indian artists who teach in English. VKV is equipped with a library of English, French and Malayalam books on a range of subjects from dance, drama and music to Ayurveda medicine. Apart from books, there are also audio and video cassettes on Indian music and dance.



Accommodation at VKV

### **Subjects taught**

You can chose to learn two subjects from a list of 14 arts/crafts/languages. The subjects include Kathakali (a dance drama form) Mohiniattam, wood carving, languages – Hindi, Malayam, Sanskrit, Kalaripayatt (martial arts), yoga, mural painting, vocal karnatic music, South Indian cooking and Indian musical instruments, kolam art (traditional floor designs), and ayurveda awareness. Please let me know if you have a subject in mind which you particularly want to pursue. You may also in have optional lessons in yoga and kalari (the Kerala martial arts), so it may be possible to take four subjects. There are no classes on the weekends and this time can be used for rest or tours. Classes are relaxed and friendly but they can very intense and will challenge the dedicated learner, since most of the lessons are on a one-to-one basis. You can decide on the length of your stay and can even change your subjects if desired.

### **Weekend Getaways**

#### **Munnar**

Munnar lies at an altitude of 1,520 metres in the east of Kerala, on the Western Ghats. Three rivers, the Mudrapuzha, the Nallathanni and the Kundala, meet here, giving it the name "three rivers" in Tamil. The hill station has beautiful tea gardens and lush greenery all around. A tour package to Munnar always includes a tour of the tea gardens. You will be staying in a Club Hotel built during the time of the Raj and still retains its old colonial style. The hotel has a exclusive bar and library besides a nine-hole golf course.

About 15kms from Munnar is the Eravikulam National Park. It has elephants, mountain goats, tigers and gaurs among other animals. Top Station, is not only famous for Neelkurinji plant that blooms once every twelve years, but is also a great vantage point to see scenic views of Tamil Nadu. Another great place is Devikulam, which is 15kms from Munnar. You can enjoy paragliding in Munnar among many other outdoor activities. If you wish to enjoy a relaxing time, you can go fishing on Devikulam lake. A good way of exploring scenic spots in Munnar is by cycling, and bicycles are available for hire.

### Backwater boat trip

Any visit to Kerala will not be complete without going on a backwater cruise. Backwaters are unique to Kerala and, the area, over the last couple of years, has seen unprecedented tourist interest. The backwaters are essentially inland lakes connected by a network of canals. The backwaters stretch for almost 1900 km in a series of interconnecting canals.



Backwater Scenes

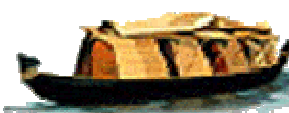
The backwaters of Kumarakom between Alappuzha and Kottayam are very popular tourist destinations. Backwaters of Kuttanad region, the rice bowl of Kerala, are also very famous. The ecology of the area is unique because for most of the year, the land is flooded. This area is probably the one and only place in world where farming is done below sea level. The Kollam - Alappuzha backwater trip is a tourist favorite. This slow journey by boat takes almost seven hours. One can see village life at close quarters besides the farming and fishing activities.



Sunset



Sunrise



Kettuvallam or houseboats are traditional vessels 60 feet in length covered with sheets made up of coconut leaves or palm leaves. Nowadays these are converted into floating luxury dwelling units. These houseboats come in all shapes and sizes. The houseboats are generally powered by a small outboard engine, allowing one to cruise along the backwaters. On the weekend getaway we will spend a night on the boat before lazily wending our way back to Alappuzha, on the Kollam-Alappuzha boat cruise. Meals will be supplied on board and you will stay in comfortable cabins with en-suite bathrooms.



## Kathakali

Kathakali is a unique dance drama of Kerala with elaborate and highly stylized gestures and facial expression. It has extraordinary make-up and costumes, and is thus not a transportable art form and is rarely seen outside Kerala. Kathakali dancers require hours of preparation as costume and make-up are important aspects of the expression of character in this art form. The dance dramas tell, in minute detail, of stories and episodes from the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramayana*. The unique aspect of this dance form is the extent and intensity of the facial expression illustrating lines of song, which surpasses other forms of dance drama. We will be treated to a lecture and demonstration on Kathakali at the VKV before viewing a special performance with notes about the story.

## The Organiser

Dr Vimala Sarma is a seasoned traveler to India and has visited South India annually since 1994. She comes from a Hindu family and understands South Indian culture and two languages – Tamil and Telugu. She has studied Indian classical dance and music. Her role is to make all the arrangements and organise the retreat – including making all the hotel bookings, VKV liaison and, transport, airline bookings and visa arrangements. She is not a tour guide in the conventional sense, but will be staying with the participants throughout the retreat. She will be available at all times to discuss difficulties, sort out problems, provide advice and cultural insights, and to act as mediator in disputes with local service providers. She will provide a cultural and familiarization briefing for participants before departure.

Participants are responsible for the safekeeping of passports, tickets and personal valuables. More importantly participants are responsible for their personal health and safety. Participants are requested to visit a doctor prior to departure for appropriate travel health advice. Please remember that participating in yoga, kalaripayatt or dance requires an overall level of fitness for all age groups. The usual conditions to manage are possible dehydration, and adjusting to changes in humidity, heat and diet.

