

South Indian Cultural Retreat & Tour

6 February-27 February 2009

**A boutique package for the discerning traveler
Immerse yourself in South Indian culture for three
weeks in Kerala**

A three-week tour, ex Sydney, which includes the following - a visit to the Mattancherry Palace in Kochi to see the traditional Kerala mural painting; then to Arunmula village for a three week retreat at a cultural centre; a weekend boat trip and visits to nearby temples and palaces. For the three weeks, immerse yourself in Indian culture and traditions in the Vijnana Kala Vedi cultural centre which teaches a wide range of subjects – including yoga, Karnatic vocal and musical instruments, wood carving, mural painting, kolam (auspicious floor designs), Kalaripayat (martial arts), Kathakali or Mohiniattam classical dance styles, languages (Hindi, Malayalam, Sanskrit), and vegetarian cooking. See a Kathakali performance after a lecture- demonstration. Eat delicious banana-leaf food, with a weekend boat trip in the Kerala backwaters. Spend the second weekend exploring the unique architecture of Kerala, visiting Sri Mahadeva temples, Kaviyura and Ettamanoor, Krishnapuram palace, and Sri Vallabha temple at Thiruvalla.

Retreat package costs \$5,000, excluding travel insurance. Package includes: all airline tickets at economy class, visas, all accommodation (twin share), all transfers. For the cultural centre, cultural briefing, tuition fees for two subjects of choice, optional yoga, all meals, a Kathakali performance after a lecture-demonstration, a weekend backwater boat trip, and visits to temples.

**Contact: vsarma@bigpond.com; 9699 4414; 0409 690 220
Numbers limited - 10% refundable deposit to secure a place
Further information: www.nayika.org**

South Indian Retreat 2009

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).

Accommodation at the retreat is clean, comfortable and spacious, with mosquito nets, on a twin-share basis. Weekend getaways to see unique temple architecture, a backwater boat trip, a Kathakali performance, and a visit to Mattancherry Palace is included. Travel insurance is not included in this price. This boutique retreat package includes:

- Airline tickets Sydney-Kochi return at economy class
 - All taxes and visas
 - Hotel accommodation at Kochi
 - Visit to Mattancherry Palace
 - All transfers
- All meals and accommodation at the VKV
 - Tuition fees for two subjects of choice
 - Optional yoga and kalari lessons
 - Kathakali performance at VKV
 - Lecture-demonstration on Kathakali
 - Backwater boat trip
- Weekend visits to temples and cultural places of interest
 - Cultural tips and advice

Payments schedule

10% of cost (\$500) payable by mid-September 2008 to secure booking
 \$2,500 payable by 30 October for air-fares and hotel and retreat bookings
 Remaining \$2,000 payable by 30 November 2008

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 maintain 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 choose 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 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 be 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.

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. The backwaters of the 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

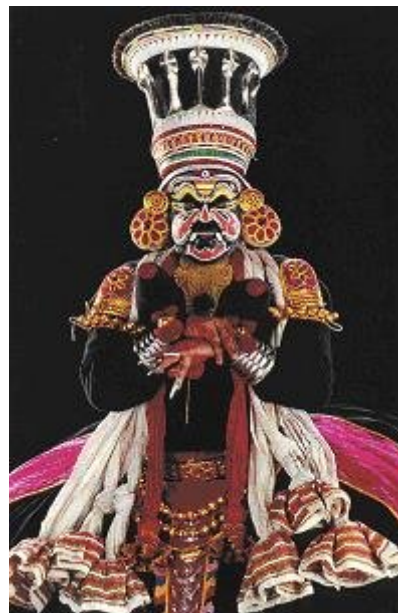


Sunrise



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



Imagine a dance theatre style with faces painted to resemble masks, billowing skirts, fantastic hats, stylized gestures, over-sized jewelry and plenty of mournful music, noise and colour. If Kathakali did not already exist in the Indian state of Kerala, it would be hard to devise such a bizarre form to-day. The elaborate costume and make-up transform ordinary humans into super-humans, inhabiting a world of gods and demons and reliving the great Indian epics, in minute detail. The mythological stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (Hindu epics) are retold in the darkness of night with only a large oil lamp to throw up dancing tongues of light and shadow, to an audience who can read the dress code, and understand the language of gestures and expression. From dusk to dawn, the gods, heroes, villains and demons come to life.

All the classical dances of India draw upon the Sanskrit text on dance and theatre, the *Natyashastra*, a catalogue of postures, gestures, foot movements and dance sequences, which lists four aspects of expressive dance (*abhinaya*) -- the use of limbs, costume, voice and feeling, to communicate meaning. But only Kathakali takes costuming (*aharya*), to extraordinary lengths to convey characterization. *Aharya* is a more inclusive term than just costume, describing the whole appearance of a character including make-up. Facial coloring to enhance gestures and eye movements is mentioned in the *Natyashastra*, but in Kathakali, *aharya*, while drawing upon the *Natyashastra*, is developed to a much greater degree to show *abhinaya* (expression). Kathakali also extends the number of hand gestures or *mudras*, listed in the *Natyashastra*, to include gestures to show grammar and punctuation.

There has been much speculation but little investigation about the origins of Kathakali as Indian scholars have focused largely on the literature. It is thought to have evolved in the late 17th century from an earlier Sanskrit drama called Kudiattam, which existed since the eight century and had painted faces. During the 17th century, important developments in Malayalam literature and drama laid the foundations for the Kathakali repertoire of heavily Sanskritised Malayali poetry. Scholars have compared Kathakali with Greek and Chinese drama, while others have attributed the skirt, hats and jackets to European influences, particularly Portuguese.

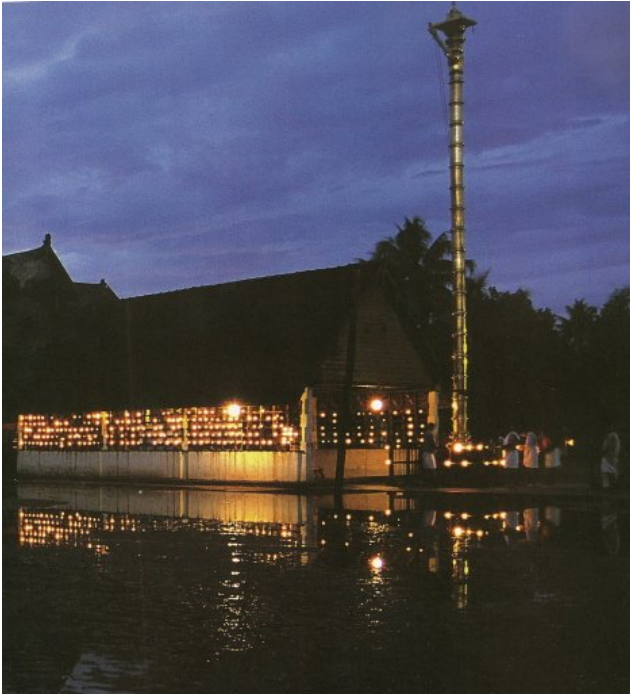
Kathakali is imbued with religious significance and ritual. Make-up is an elaborate affair in this all-male art: the artist lies on the ground and appears to be asleep while the make-up is applied. Colours are made from various natural pigments ground and mixed with coconut oil or water. Refined characters have the white border (*chutti*) above the jaw line to frame the face, which is made by building up layer upon layer of rice paste. As the first layer dries, the next wet layer is applied. Even the eyes are reddened with the seed from the flower of *Solanum pubescens* which causes temporary inflammation of the eyes.

Because the make-up takes hours to apply, Kathakali is the least transportable of all the classical dance styles, and a performance is rarely seen in full outside Kerala. Although faces may appear mask-like in photographs, they are not rigid masks. On the contrary, the make-up enhances movements of the eyes, cheeks, lower and upper eyelids, nostrils, brows and chin, and lips, each of which a skilled dancer can move independently. The makeup creates an extraordinarily expressive face. Even the smallest quiver in a facial muscle is magnified by the make-up and thus conveyed to the audience.

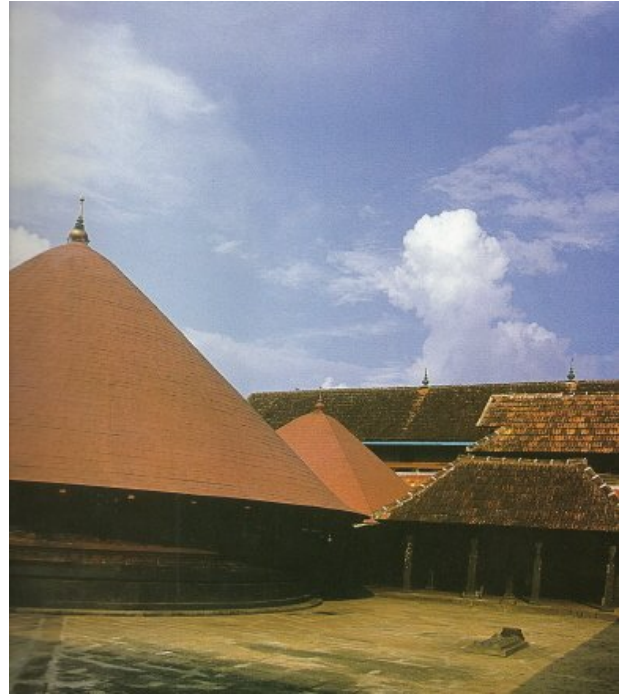
Kerala Temple Architecture

It is our intention in this tour to glimpse the wonderful Kerala temple architecture. Unlike temples elsewhere in India, Kerala temples are made of wood, with copper tiles on low roofs. Temples follow a rectangular structure enclosing an inner court in which are small structures which house the deities, with the main shrine being the *srikovil*. The wooden structures are decorated with murals and carvings. In front of all Kerala temples, there is a tall brass pole surmounted by an animal or bird, The Kaviyur temple is perhaps the finest

example of an early temple where wood carving has reached its peak of development. The outside walls of the temple are covered in niches for oil lamps. Ettamanoor dates back to the 12th century and its present form is a result of renovations in the 16th century. Kaviyur is possibly the finest temple in Kerala. The inscriptions on the plinth date back to well over a thousand years. The present structure is likely to be close to 500 years old and has the intimacy of a typical Kerala temple. The wood carvings in the temple are very fine and depict stories from the Hindu epic the Ramayana and also show the ten avatars of Vishnu.



The lamps on the wall are lit in Sri Vallabha temple turning it into a screen of dancing flames



Sri Mahadeva temple at Vazhapalli – inner court



Dusk at the Sri Mahadeva temple at Kaviyur



Carving of Siva seen to be killing Yama (the god of death) in Kaviyur

Mattancherry Palace

The Mattancherry Palace is also known as the Dutch Palace of Kochi. The Portuguese built it and they gave it to the Maharaja of Kochi, Veera Kerala Varma. It acquired the name "Dutch Palace" after the Dutch renovated it in the year 1663. Now, this palace is a gallery of exotic paintings and murals, thus signifying the rich tradition of the Hindus through art. One can find a vast collection of paintings and portraits of the Maharajas of Cochin. The Hindu temple art is beautifully depicted in the form of murals in Cochin Mattancherry palace. There is a certain medieval charm associated with the Mattancherry Palace.



Mattancherry Palace is a storehouse of ancient paintings and art forms. The Mattancherry Palace came to be known as the Dutch Palace after the Dutch carried out some renovation and extension work. This palace was built by the Portuguese in 1555 A.D. and was then given as a present to the Maharaja of Kochi, Veera Kerala Varma. This palace of Kerala has now been converted into an art gallery showcasing some of the best paintings and murals of Hindu mythology. The walls are covered in murals in the Kerala style.

Kerala mural painting is a dying art and originals dating back a couple of hundred years are to be seen at the Mattancherry Palace. Also close to the VKV is the gallery of Suresh Muthukulam, one of the few remaining artists who paint in this unique style using natural pigments.

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. She has studied Indian classical dance and music, and is currently studying Sanskrit. She will make all the arrangements and organise the retreat – including making all the hotel bookings, VKV liaison and, transport, airline bookings and visa arrangements. Participants will be able to maximize their learning and cultural experiences, in accordance with their own inclinations. Dr Sarma will be staying with the participants throughout the retreat and 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.

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24 July 08