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Kerala, Poovar

WHY GO NOW Sail on palm-fringed backwaters that aren't in Alleppey

While in India's southern tip, a cruise on the backwaters may be de rigueur, but given the popularity of Kerala it's best to eschew the familiar for the unexplored. In other words, think Poovar instead of Alleppey, using Thiruvananthapuram as a base instead of Kochi.

It is in Poovar, 35 kilometres from Thiruvananthapuram, that the Neyyar river joins the Arabian Sea, giving rise to a palm-fringed stretch of placid backwaters. An hour- or two-long boat ride cruises narrow **mangrove canals**, past dozens of avian species that thrive in this ecosystem. The muddiness of the water in the initial stretch is only recent and caused by the floods; boatmen say that the water is otherwise pristine through the year. **Cormorants** sun themselves on treetops, and **pie kingfisher** swoop in and out of the water in search of breakfast; even on cloudy days, the birds unfailingly show up along the banks.

In just about half an hour, the boats venture into open waters with a thin sandbar separating the canal from the sea. Locals call it **Gold Sand Beach**, and with the morning sun setting the sand aglow like molten gold, it fits.

Morning cruises also bring you face to face with the people who call Poovar home. Fishing boats, probably just back from an early-morning expedition, dock along the shore. Kids play on the beach, shouting and laughing, or dive off from flat rocks at the edge of the canal into the water. Tall crosses are interspersed with Hindu shrines along the waters, an image of the cultural harmony the region has prided itself on.

A few minutes beyond the last bend, the boat anchors at **Pozhiyoor**, the spot that marks the end of Kerala, with Tamil Nadu right ahead. —Charukesi Ramadurai



A boat ride along Poovar's sun-loving backwaters is a chance to glimpse kingfishers and cormorants.

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Andhra Pradesh, Lepakshi

WHY GO NOW Gods (and saree designs) etched in stone

Lepakshi, which is 120 kilometres north of Bengaluru, might be lesser-known, but believes in a grand welcome. The first thing you'd encounter on the town's main road is a 15-foot-tall, intricately carved **Nandi statue**. Beyond lies Lepakshi's main attraction, the **Veerabhadra Temple**, which like the statue, was built in the mid-16th century during the reign of the Vijayanagara empire.



Veerabhadra Temple, Lepakshi

Folklore about Shiva and Parvati, their royal wedding and subsequent separation, along with stories of Ram and Sita abound in Lepakshi. It is believed that when Ravana kidnapped Sita, Jatayu fought against the king and died in battle at this very spot. As it lay wounded, its wings cut off by Ravana, Rama said with compassion, "*le pakshi*" (rise, O bird!), hence the name, Lepakshi.

Some of these stories will live on in the temple for centuries. Pillars, etched with carvings, support the ceiling of the *natyamantapa* (dancing hall) at the temple's core, on which murals of divine musicians, a dancing Parvati, Brahma playing the cymbals, Surya on the *nadaswaram*, and Shiva as Nataraja are painted using vegetable and floral dyes. The temple's main draw is a **'hanging pillar,'** a carved

column that doesn't touch the floor, ending a few centimetres above ground. It is believed to have been moved slightly from its original position by a British engineer who attempted to understand the architectural anomaly—in vain. The outer courtyard or *latamantapa*, is adorned with elegant nature motifs, now immortalised in the borders of traditional sarees from the region. —Charukesi Ramadurai.

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Nagaland, Pangti, Wokha District

WHY GO NOW Witness the singularly spectacular Amur falcon migration

Travelling to Nagaland's Wokha district along bone-jarring roads is not for the faint of heart, but those who make the journey are treated to a true spectacle of nature.

Every winter, towards the end of October, millions of migratory Amur falcons make the long journey from Mongolia, China, Siberia and Russia to southern Africa, stopping over at the **Doyang reservoir** by the tiny Naga village of Pangti. The sight of these grey-feathered birds filling the sky over Doyang is one for the bucket lists. Amur falcons fly for about five days before they roost in Doyang, and have one of the longest avian migration routes in the world—up to 22,000 kilometres. What makes this phenomenon even more heartening is that Pangti was, until recently, globally infamous for hunting the falcons by the thousands. Thanks to conservation and sensitisation efforts, former hunters are now guides and conservationists, ensuring that the Amur falcons continue to return to Nagaland year after year.

—Hoshner Reporter



SRINIVASA S/SHUTTERSTOCK (TEMPLE), INARA/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (FALCON)