

# A cycling trip through Kerala, India

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Leading a congregation in Mobile, Alabama, over the past year and a half has been a lot of work. Most of that work is not physical labor, but rather communication. Communication is key. Frequently, that communication takes place in the context of a meal: breakfast, lunch, dinner, afternoon snacks.

The downside of all this communication is that my waistline has been steadily increasing: 34, 36, 38.... When will it stop? That was my immediate motivation for booking a two-week cycling trip with Kalypso Adventure Tours, headquartered in Kochi, formerly Cochin, India.

When one thinks of India, one thinks of a land of exceptional diversity. With some of the most majestic buildings in the entire world, breathtaking landscapes, and culinary creations. In fact, one of my friends in Mobile had been to Cochin about a year ago on a culinary trip. We were going only to Kerala, which is in the southwestern part of the country and, so, many of the "great" sites were many hundreds of miles away. (For example, the Taj Mahal).

Kerala had more than enough history and culture to fascinate us. Known as the Queen of the Arabian Sea, Cochin has been an important port city and epicenter of the spice trade since medieval times. The first couple of days were tourism and shopping. We were taken around the region by Augustine Lopez, a very knowledgeable tour guide, who was able to include no less than four ancient synagogues at my request, as well as a variety of other historical and cultural sites.



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The next day we started our trip, heading out from Cochin by van and then getting on our bikes about an hour outside the city. We cycled towards the Western Ghats mountain range that runs parallel to the western coast of the Indian peninsula--one of the eight hottest hotspots of biological diversity in the world. We began to see some of the spices that made the area so important for trade and commerce as well as tasty cooking.

Kalypso furnished us with Francis, a biking guide, who cycled with us as well as a van that carried our suitcases and was available to collect any of those who might run out of steam. Francis spoke English very well and was always inquiring as to our welfare.

There were also occasions where we would all deliberately get in the van and quickly transverse an area either because it was just too much to do in a day, or it wasn't particularly interesting scenery, or yikes because we didn't have an ounce of energy left.

Depending on the day, we would arrive in the afternoon at a new hotel where there might be activities scheduled for us. This included two Indian cooking lessons, which might be more accurately described as cooking demonstrations; two kayaking excursions, the first of which I was too exhausted to partake of; two hikes, the second of which was through the Periyar Tiger Reserve; and two elephant encounters, which were both terrific photo opportunities but also a bit sad to see such majestic creatures essentially reduced to servitude.

We were shocked to hear that there are probably only 35 to 40 tigers in the whole Periyar Tiger Reserve. The Mannans are an indigenous group which are today the conservators of the preserve. While we didn't see any tigers, we did come across a family of wild bison and we were apparently very close to a solo elephant who had been expelled from his herd a number of years earlier.

One of the nice things about the trip was how it could be customized to meet each individual's interests. We had the choice of upgrading hotels and substituting different types of activities. By design, it was a very active tour and there's no question we all came back in better shape than we started out. There was a good balance of athletic activity, culture, culinary delights, and normal tourism.

From the moment we left Cochin to Thattekad, we were biking most days, almost always in the morning following breakfast. The shortest was from Munnar, a mountain resort area, to Chinnakanal, which was only 22 kilometers, passing through the Grahams Lands Tea Estate and the Lockhart Gap Mountain Pass. The longest cycling day was towards the end of the trip from Vagamon to Thanneermukkam, which was 88 kilometers.

Francis stopped about halfway, expecting to put my bicycle on the bike rack, which was attached to the back of the van, and to have me ride the rest of the way, but he saw how determined I was and, indeed, I was able to complete the entire trip on my bicycle. I walked up two imposing hills but otherwise cycled the whole way. We closed our two weeks near Alleppey on a houseboat, which sailed along the backwaters and then at a homestay near Nedumudi, which gave a different perspective of the backwaters.

There's something immensely liberating about breaking away from one's routine, challenging one's self physically, and immersing one's self in a completely different culture. India is a fascinating country in the midst of tremendous change. Living an adventurous life can help us enrich ourselves culturally, inspire us to think about things in new ways, and see our own lives from a broader perspective. As Vincent van Gogh apparently said, "Normality is a paved road. It's comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it."