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### Beaches

#### Kovalam

Kovalam is an internationally renowned beach with three adjacent crescent beaches. It has been a favourite haunt of tourists, especially Europeans, since the 1930s. A massive rocky promontory on the beach has created a beautiful bay of calm waters ideal for sea bathing.

The leisure options at this beach are plenty and diverse. Sunbathing, swimming, herbal body toning massages, special cultural programmes and catamaran cruising are some of them. The tropical sun acts so fast that one can see the faint blush of coppery tan on the skin in a matter of minutes. Life on the beach begins late in the day and carries on well into the night. The beach complex includes a string of budget cottages, Ayurvedic health resorts, convention facilities, shopping zones, swimming pools, Yoga and Ayurvedic massage centres.

#### Poovar

Located 12 km south of Kovalam, an isolated but spectacular beach, Poovar is situated close to the Neyyar River estuary. A trading port in its early days, it is today an important tourist destination.

#### Varkala

Varkala, a calm and quiet hamlet, lies on the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram district. It has several places of tourist interests like a beautiful beach, a 2,000-year-old Vishnu Temple and the Ashramam - Sivagiri Mutt a little distance from the beach. At the serene Varkala beach is a quiet sea resort rich in mineral water springs. A dip in the holy waters at this beach is believed to purge the body of impurities and the soul of all sins; hence the name 'Papanasam beach'. A two thousand year old shrine the Janardhanaswamy Temple stands on the cliffs overlooking the beach, a short distance away. The Sivagiri Mutt, founded by the great Hindu reformer and philosopher Sree Narayana Guru (1856 - 1928) is also close by. Varkala offers excellent accommodation facilities for tourists and is fast becoming a popular health resort with many Ayurvedic massage centres.

#### Shankhumugham Beach

Just 7 km from the city of Thiruvananthapuram, the Shankhumugham beach is a favourite haunt for people coming to watch sunsets. The beach is adjacent to the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport and Veli Tourist Village. An indoor recreation club, the matsya kanyaka (a gigantic, 35 m



## Best of Kerala

A land of myriad tourism attractions from the backwaters, beaches, culture and ayurveda to rolling hills, heritage palaces and thrilling wildlife, Kerala is truly 'God's Own Country'.

long sculpture of a mermaid) and a restaurant shaped like a starfish are some of the attractions at the Shankhumugham beach.

### Waterfalls

#### Athirappalli and Vazhachal

Athirappalli and Vazhachal, the two scenic and popular waterfalls on the edge of the Sholayar forest ranges are just 5 km apart. The Athirappalli Falls joins the Chalakkudy river after plummeting down a drop of 80 feet. Vazhachal is part of the Chalakkudy river. Both the waterfalls, their cool, misty waters cascading down in the backdrop of thick green forest and rocky terrain, are a scintillating experience to visitors.

#### Palaruvi Waterfall

Palaruvi - literally, stream of milk - is one of Kerala's most picturesque waterfalls, cascading down a height of 300 feet. It is a favourite picnic spot for visitors from all over south India. The journey to Palaruvi through the dense tropical forest is a spellbinding experience. Palaruvi which means stream of milk makes its way down the rocks, from a height of 300 feet. It is a beautiful picnic spot. The PWD Inspection Bungalow and the KTDC Motel here offer comfortable accommodation.

### Hillstations

#### Munnar

It is one of the attractions that contributed to Kerala's popularity as a travel destination among domestic and foreign travellers. Situated at the confluence of three mountain streams - Muthirapuzha, Nallathanni and Kundala, and perched about 1600 m above sea level, the hill station of Munnar once used to be the summer resort of the erstwhile British

administration in south India. This hill station is marked by vast expanses of tea plantations, colonial bungalows, rivulets, waterfalls and cool weather. It is also an ideal destination for trekking and mountain biking. Munnar has a legacy of its own when it comes to the origins and evolution of tea plantations. Taking account of this legacy and to preserve and showcase some of the exquisite and interesting aspects on the genesis and growth of tea plantations in Kerala's high ranges, a museum exclusively for tea was opened some years ago by Tata Tea in Munnar. This Tea Museum houses curios, photographs and machineries; all of which have a story to tell on the origins and growth of tea plantations in Munnar. The museum is located at the Nallathanni Estate of Tata Tea in Munnar and is worth a visit.

#### Mattupetty

Another place of interest, located about 13 km from Munnar Town, is Mattupetty. Situated at a height of 1700 m above sea level, Mattupetty is known for its storage masonry dam and the beautiful lake, which offers pleasurable boat rides, enabling one to enjoy the surrounding hills and landscape. Mattupetty's fame is also attributed to the dairy farm run by the Indo-Swiss Livestock Project, where one would come across different high yielding breeds of cows. Mattupetty with its lush green tea plantations, rolling grasslands and the Shola forests is also ideal for trekking and is home to a variety of birds.

#### Pattumala

Pattumala or Hill draped in silk, that's what they call the fascinating place that we are featuring for you this month. This silken hill, in Peermade in exhilarating Idukki, has charms like no other. The ▶

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lofty peaks, the little streams and the green expanse of the tea plantations give the hills an ethereal beauty. An early morning walk through all this breathtaking loveliness might make you want to repeat the immortal lines, Bliss was it that dawn to be alive! At the top of a hill is the Velankanni Matha Church, a famous pilgrim center, which is built entirely of granite. Don't miss the delightful flower garden nearby. Pattumala is also home to two of the biggest names in the tea production sector - Harrisons Malayalam and A V Thomas & Co.

#### Vazhikkadavu

On the outskirts of the district is this hill station of rocky terrains sought after for its pristine nature. On one side of the main rock are extremely tall and steep rocks and on the other is a valley of fearful depth. Bordering this crude landscape like a silver lace is the Meenachil River. During the months of December/January the landscape comes alive in a riot of colours with orchids and wild flowers.

#### Wegamon

This enchanting hill station on the Idukki - Kottayam border, dotted with tea gardens and meadows, will soon be one of India's foremost eco-



tourism projects. The breeding centre of the Kerala Livestock Board is located here.

#### Wildlife

##### Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary

The pride of Kerala and a testimony to nature's splendour and human innovation, the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated on the banks of the Periyar Lake - an artificial lake, at Thekkady. Here the high ranges of the Western Ghats are clothed in dense evergreen, moist deciduous forests and savannah grasslands. Below this thick green canopy roam herds of elephants, sambar, tigers, gaurs, lion tailed macaques and Nilgiri langurs.

In addition to elephant rides, cruises on the lake and treks to the ruined Mangaladevi temple - a beautiful old stone temple situated in the heart of the Thekkady forest; this sanctuary offers the unique opportunity to watch and photograph wild elephants at close quarters.

Lake Palace and Aranya Nivas are two idyllic accommodation options set in the sylvan lake side background. The romantic Lake Palace, formerly a summer retreat of the Maharaja of Travancore, is built on a small island accessible only by boat. Aranya Nivas (Jungle Retreat) a stone lodge with rubble masonry and colonial style of architecture at the head of the lake is a premium property of the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation.

##### Eravikulam National Park

It is an ideal place for seeing the biodiversity of high elevation shola-grassland ecosystem. A sanctuary for the endangered mountain goat of South India, the Nilgiri Tahr, the Eravikulam National Park stands out for the stark beauty of its rolling grasslands and sholas, spread over 97 sq km in the Kannan devan hills. Anamudi, the highest peak (2695 m) south of Himalayas, stands majestically in the core area of the national park. The slopes of the hills abound in many kinds of rare flora which include rare terrestrial and epiphytic orchids, and beautiful wild balsams. Rajamalai is the tourism zone of the National Park, where the visitors are taken in forest dept vehicles and introduced to the shola - grassland eco system unique to this region.

##### Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary

A unique thorny scrub forest with xerophyte species, Chinnar is the habitat for the endangered Giant Grizzled Squirrel of India. Their total number here would be less than 200. Located in the rain shadow area of the Western Ghats, unlike other sanctuaries in Kerala, Chinnar gets only less than

two months of rain every year. Rich in wildlife, the mixed deciduous forests here are ideal for trekking.

An extensive Sandalwood forest nearby is an added attraction at Chinnar. This is also an ideal place for watching herds of gaur and elephants amble past. Dry deciduous forests, high sholas and some grasslands add to the diversity of the sanctuary. As one travels from Karimnathi to Chinnar, elephants, spotted deer, sambar, hanuman langur and even peacocks can be spotted on either side of the road.

#### Palaces

##### Padmanabhapuram Palace

A magnificent wooden palace of the 16th century, Padmanabhapuram Palace lies at the land's end of mainland India - Kanyakumari. An enticing edifice to any lover of art and architecture this old palace of the Rajas of the erstwhile Travancore (1550 to 1750 AD) is a fine specimen of Kerala's indigenous style of architecture. The antique interiors are replete with intricate rosewood carvings and sculptured decor. The palace also contains 17th and 18th century murals. One can see: the musical bow in mahogany, windows with coloured mica, royal chairs with Chinese carvings, 'Thaikkottaram' or the Queen Mother's palace with painted ceilings, rose wood and teak carved ceilings with 90 different floral designs. Visitors to the palace are often overwhelmed by the royal splendour of erstwhile Travancore. Though the palace is situated in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu State, it comes under the Government of Kerala's administration.

##### Koyikkal Palace

The Koyikkal Palace, situated far of away from the city, was actually built for Unniyamma Rani of the Venad Royal Family who ruled the land between 1677 and 1688. The palace is a double storied traditional nalukettu with slanting gabled roofs and an inner courtyard. Today, the palace houses a Folklore Museum and a Numismatics Museum set up by the Department of Archaeology. The Folklore Museum, a treasure house of quaint musical instruments, occupational implements, household utensils, models of folk arts etc., was set up in 1992. The Numismatics Museum at the Koyikkal Palace is the only one of its kind in the state. Among the exhibits are some of the oldest coins of Kerala - Ottaputhen, Erattaputhen, Kallyugarayan Panam etc. A Venetian coin named Amaida, believed to have been presented to Jesus Christ, is also a property of this museum.

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A D Choudhury



Goutam Deb



J K Mohanty



Dr Suborno Bose

to several important medical conferences, scientific workshops, cultural programmes and workshops and corporate AGMs in the eastern region of the country. It consists of two facilities, the Science Centre and the Convention Centre.

The Convention Centre complex comprises the Grand Theatre (2232 seating capacity), one Mini Auditorium (392 seating capacity) and a seminar hall building with 11 halls ranging from 15 to 100 seating capacity, indoor (270sq.m.) and open air exhibition ground (20000 sq m). The auditoria and seminar halls are fully air-conditioned. With a view to further expand its convention centre facility, Science

City, Kolkata, plans to develop a permanent structure in its exhibition ground. "We are looking at going in for public private partnership to expand the convention facility," says A D Choudhury, director, Science City, Kolkata. The convention centre is occupied 235 days in a year. It can host up to 5,000-6,000 people which is usually the case during medical conferences which takes place once or twice a year. The major programmes conducted are from November to February (medical and other national and international meetings). "West Bengal as a MICE destination is definitely growing. Earlier there were 50-60 events taking place round the year and lately the

number has increased manifold to 400-500 events a year," adds Choudhury.

Most of the star-category hotels and budget hotels are located in Kolkata and a few in Darjeeling and cities like Siliguri and Durgapur. There are some luxury resorts in the Dooars region. Business visitors have been the larger chunk of guests at hotels in Kolkata, who come to the city for their official or business engagements. This is because over the years, Kolkata has emerged as an important IT/ITeS and MICE destination in the city's star-category hotels.

Currently several leading

hospitality groups are either setting up or in the process of setting up their properties in the region. ITC Hotels, which is already operating its luxury property ITC Sonar, is setting up its second hotel in the city adjacent to its existing property. The Park Hotel, the flagship brand of the Apeejay Group also plans to set up another property on the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass on the outer limits of the city. The Great Eastern Hotel is being majorly re-modelled and the new rechristened hotel is likely to be inaugurated soon. Home grown SPS Group took over a non-operational property and relaunched it as 'Fortune Loudon' after entering into an arrangement with ITC Fortune. ITC Fortune is also operating another hotel in Howrah on the other side of the river Hoogly.

Swiss hospitality major Swissotel Hotels & Resorts in association with Ambuja Realty of the Neotias has launched Swissotel, Kolkata, one of the finest properties in the city. The hotel brand also has plans to expand the facilities in the near future. Several other hotel projects are lined up along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass. JW Marriott and InterContinental too has plans for the city. SP Jain's Pride Group is all set to inaugurate its maiden project - Pride Bizotel in Kolkata soon. Hilton is also setting up a property in the city.

#### Newer avenues

Major projects are also lined up in Asansol-Durgapur region and Siliguri, the industrial towns of the state. Hospitality major Wyndham



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Sundarwasala at Ffort Raichak

is all set to enter Asansol after joining hands with Kolkata based BlueChip Projects. Besides, several leading players like Peerless-Sarovar combine, Rose Valley, Citi Residenci and other mid-sized business hotels are already operating from Durgapur. Bengal Aerotropolis Projects, is developing the country's first privately owned Aerotropolis in association with 'Changi Airport Consultants at Andal near Durgapur, which when launched will increase business travel manifold in the region.

Siliguri, which is the 'Gateway to the north east' and a major trading hub too has several business class hotels like the Sarovars, Sinclairs, etc. "The growth prospects of Siliguri is tremendous. Siliguri, not only is a business and trading hub but at the same time a transit point for the entire region. Tourists going to either the north east, Darjeeling hills or the Dooars have to pass through Siliguri. So there is demand for more quality rooms," says Coutam Deb, minister in charge (MIC). North Bengal Development, Government of West Bengal.

With players like Ambuja Realty and Sarovars present in the region, Hyatt has shown interest to set up a new property in North Bengal. In neighbouring Jharkhand, most of the hospitality related activities are more or less confined in and around Ranchi, the state capital. The state government bagged investment proposals

for setting up new hospitality projects in the state. Among the investment proposals, one of them is from the Mumbai-based AVI Hospitality' for setting up mid-sized hotels in places like Deoghar, Dhanbad and Parasnath at an investment of ₹ 50 crore, which will provide direct employment opportunities to around 300 people.

Looking at Guwahati, there are several star category hotels in the city which meet the requirements for mid-sized meetings and conventions. Prominent among them is The Brahmputra Ashok, Hotel Dynasty, Hotel Rajmahal, Hotel Starline, Hotel Agneedeeep Continental. The Brahmputra Ashok plans to add a convention centre facility for 1000 guests as part of its expansion plans.

Vikas Sarawgi, honorary treasurer, Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI)-Eastern region and director NCS Travel and Tours says, "Though major cities of the east like Kolkata, Guwahati, Bhubaneswar and Ranchi have tremendous possibilities in terms of MICE movements, they lack of proper convention facilities and air-connectivity. In case of Guwahati, though it is an important commercial and business hub and the gateway to the north east, the MICE sector is again dominated by regional players and SMEs."

DS (Assam) Hospitality Limited, a joint venture between Dharampal Satyapal Group and Guwahati

Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) is setting up a 196-room keys five-star hotel in Guwahati and the hotel will be branded as Radisson Hotels, Guwahati. It will have state-of-the-art convention facilities for 500 odd people. "Darjeeling, the hill station can be explored as a MICE destination in the summer season. Sunderbans too is an ideal destination for official meetings and interactions, but lack of proper road connectivity and hotel accommodation are the major deterrents for the growth of the MICE sector," adds Bose.

Odisha is another state in the eastern radar which has done wonders in terms of travel and tourism in the last few years. Several hospitality groups are present in the state, which include the home-grown Swosti Group, The Chariot, The Crown, Mayfair Hotels & Resorts, Trident Hotels, Ginger Hotel, Royal Mid Town, Hotel Kalinga Ashok, etc. Besides, several new properties are coming up in the state at Bhubaneswar and at the beach resorts of Puri and Konark. Bhubaneswar on the other hand is fast growing as a MICE destination. "The Odisha government and Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation have taken up several initiatives to spruce up infrastructure of the city and state as a whole. Road connectivity has been improved between Bhubaneswar, Rourkela, Puri, Konark, Cuttack, etc. However, the airport at Bhubaneswar falls short of international requirements and cannot handle huge air-traffic. It needs to be upgraded to the international status at the earliest to meet the growing demands," adds Dr Suborno Bose, chairman & chief mentor, IndiSmart Group Worldwide (Owner of star category Business Hotels & IHM and IAM Hotel Schools).

"The Odisha tourism department has now started spending huge amounts on advertisements to attract tourists. But in order to tap the MICE segment the government is yet to do anything," adds J K Mohanty, chairman and MD, Swosti Group.

### Need for infrastructure

The road connectivity between Kolkata and nearby

tourist locations like Digha, Mandarmoni, Bishnupur needs to be improved in order to attract MICE tourists into the state. Smaller destinations like Durgapur and Siliguri in West Bengal have immense opportunities but lack proper infrastructure like good air-connectivity. Bagdogra airport also lacks the capacity to handle large passenger traffic. On a positive note, Guwahati's Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport is connected with major cities of the country like Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and others. Guwahati is well connected with other parts of the country through a well-knit railway network. However, the state governments need to lobby hard to bring at least few top-ranking international carriers to the region.

### Future ahead

The future of MICE tourism in the east is encouraging. Once the upgraded Kolkata international airport is fully operational and all the infrastructural activities in and around the city like setting up of 'new flyovers, metro rail connectivity, etc., is over it will become an international destination.

"If the state government understands the importance of setting up a dedicated convention centre and pursues it, we sincerely feel that the city with its exotic tourist attractions, hospitality, strong cultural background, safety and security would emerge as an ideal MICE destination. Bhubaneswar has an immense growth potential as far as a MICE destination is concerned," adds Bose.

With the launch of new luxury properties coming up in Guwahati this will cater to the conferencing and banking needs of the SME sector. "But to make it large in the MICE segment, the Assam government needs to explore the possibility of setting up a large convention facility may be through private participation which can accommodate 2,000 or more delegates. It can also hard sell its tourism potentials and strengths to lure business houses to host their conventions in the city," says Sarawgi. ■

(With inputs from Joy Roy Chowdhury)