





Where the World Comes to Worship

Sabarimala is one of India's most revered pilgrimage centres, attracting millions of devotees annually. Nestled in the dense forests of the Western Ghats in Pathanamthitta district in Kerala, the Sabarimala temple is a sacred sanctuary. People, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, are welcome at Sabarimala. The major pilgrimage season at Sabarimala is the 41-day *Mandala kaalam*, that begins on the first day of the Malayalam month of Vrishchikam [November-December]. It is a period marked by devout chants and rituals that resonate across the world.



About Sabarimala

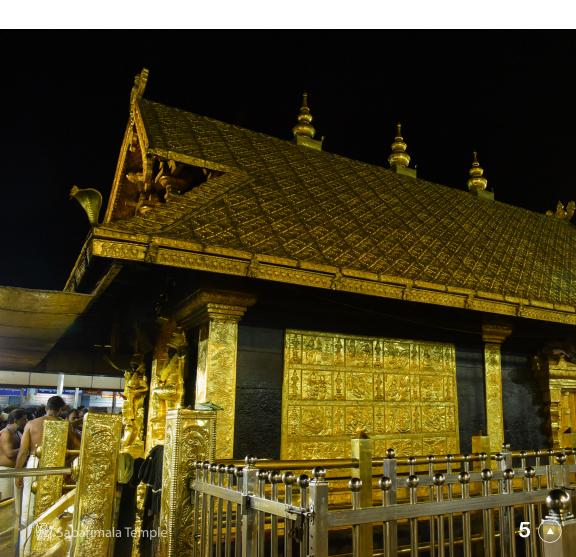
Located in Pathanamthitta district in Kerala, the Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha temple is dedicated to Swami (Lord) Ayyappa. Situated in the hillock of Sabarimala, the Sree Dharma Sastha temple is surrounded by mountains and dense forests that are a part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

Location: Sabarimala is situated in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district, nestled deep within the dense forests of the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

Dedication: The temple is dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, who is venerated as an 'Naishtik Brahmachari' (eternal celibate).

Significance: Sabarimala ranks among the world's largest annual pilgrimage destinations, drawing millions of devotees who come to seek blessings and fulfill vows during the pilgrimage season.

Pilgrimage Season: The major pilgrimage season at Sabarimala is the 41-day *Mandala kaalam*, that begins on the first day of the Malayalam month of Vrishchikam [November-December]. It is a period marked by devout chants and rituals that resonate across the world.



Distinctive Features

Pathinettampadi (18 Sacred Steps): Ascending these gold-plated steps represents the devotee's path to self-awareness and spiritual cleansing.

Irumudi kettu: Pilgrims carry a specially prepared bundle of offerings, a crucial ritual of the pilgrimage.

Vrutham (41-day Austerity): Before embarking on the pilgrimage, devotees undertake a strict 41-day period of austerity, focusing on maintaining purity and self-discipline.

Access: The temple can be reached through various routes, via Erumeli, Vandiperiyar and Chalakkayam. The Pamba serves as the primary base from which pilgrims start their journey to the temple.

Environment: The temple administration enforces a "green protocol" to ensure the cleanliness and ecological balance of the area, advocating for a plastic-free environment.

Cultural Harmony: Sabarimala is notable for its inclusive nature, welcoming pilgrims of all religions, castes and creeds, reflecting the principle of "Tatwamasi" - "thou art that."

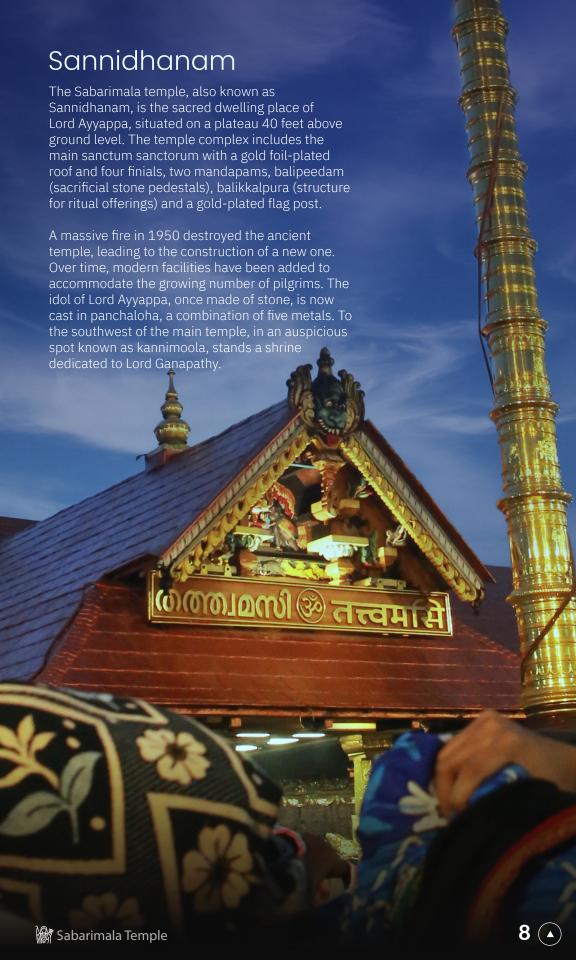
Historical Insight: Although historical records are limited, Sabarimala is thought to have become a major pilgrimage site in the 20th century. The temple has been rebuilt several times following disasters caused by Nature and human activity.



Sabarimala Temple Overview

The Sabarimala temple sits on a plateau at the height of 40 feet from ground level. The holy shrine of Lord Ayyappa comprises a gold-plated sanctum sanctorum, spacious mandapams (pillared halls), the *balikkalpura* (sacred platform), the *kodimaram* (flagstaff) and the revered eighteen sacred steps.





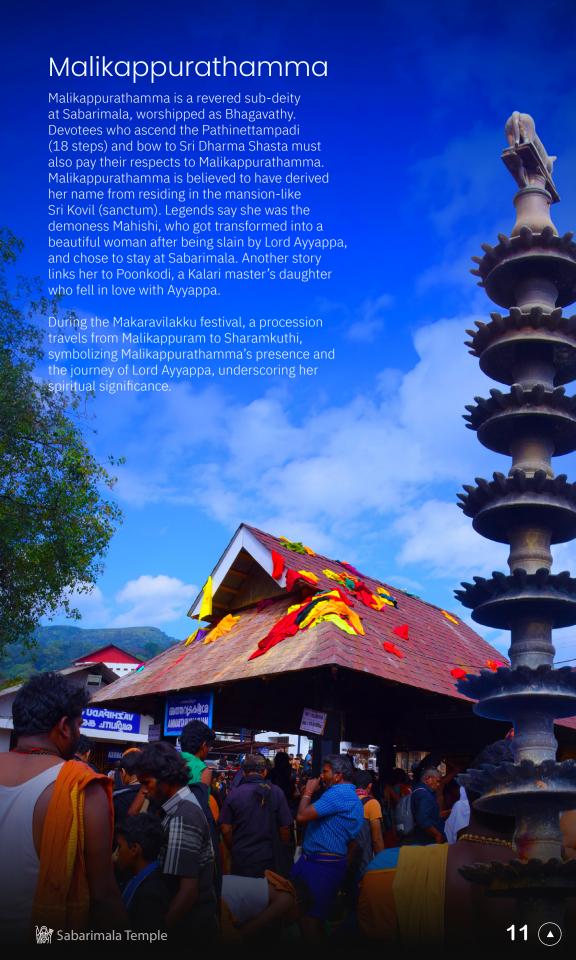
Pathinettampadi

The Pathinettampadi, or eighteen steps of Sabarimala, holds deep symbolic significance rooted in ancient beliefs and legends. In Tantric tradition, the number 18 represents the eight jeevathmas (bodily selves) and ten paramathmas (cosmic self). Other interpretations suggest it symbolizes the five cells, six conditions, and seven minerals of the physical body, or the eighteen worlds, puranas, and weapons associated with Lord Ayyappa. This number also represents the transcendence of the material world, and it is considered sacred in various religions globally.

According to Hindu legend, Lord Ayyappa asked his earthly father, the King of Pandalam, to build a temple with 18 steps. Symbolically, climbing these steps represents overcoming the five senses, eight emotions, three gunas or qualities, knowledge and ignorance. Only devotees who have observed the rules of abstinence and carry the irumudi (a two-part bundle) are eligible to touch or ascend the holy Pathinettampadi, signifying their spiritual readiness.





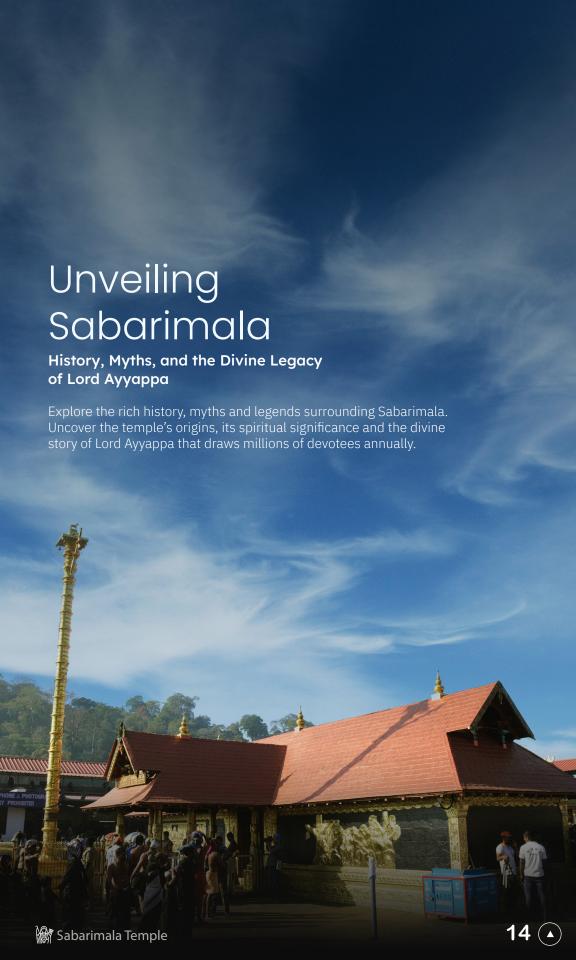


Pamba ascend Neelimala. Originating from Pulachi Mala in Sabarimala, the Pamba is the third longest in Kerala and flows into the Vembanad backwaters. Along its banks are numerous places of worship, including the famous Aranmula temple, and structures of archaeological significance from the Stone Age, underscoring the river's historical and cultural importance.

Vavar Swami

The historical tale of Lord Ayyappa's friendship with Vavar Swami highlights the religious harmony embodied by Sabarimala. Pilgrims traditionally visit Erumeli and offer prayers at the Vavar mosque before ascending to Sabarimala. According to a legend, Vavar, a Muslim warrior, became a close companion of Lord Ayyappa after numerous battles. Vavar is mentioned in Ayyappa's songs, including Sasthampattu and Bhuthanatha Upakhyana, as a devoted follower of Ayyappa.

A mosque was built for Vavar in Erumeli, and the Pettathullal procession of Ayyappa devotees begins here, moving to Vavar mosque before entering the forest route to Sabarimala. Vavar is also honoured with a special shrine at Sabarimala, where it is believed that the priest is a descendant of Vavar Swami's family, symbolizing the enduring religious harmony at the shrine.



History of Sabarimala

The history of the Sabarimala temple is deeply rooted in mythology and legend, centered around the divine figure of Lord Ayyappa, the son of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu in his Mohini avatar. Ayyappa's mission to defeat the demoness Mahishi led to the establishment of the temple, chosen by Ayyappa himself on the mount of Sabari under the patronage of King Rajashekharan. Although initially a modest temple, Sabarimala gained prominence in the mid-20th century after being rebuilt following an arson attack in 1950. With the installation of the Panchaloha idol and the covering of the 18 sacred steps with gold foil, the temple became a significant pilgrimage site. The philosophy of "Tatwamasi" (thou art that) now guides millions of devotees who visit Sabarimala each year, making it one of the most-visited places of worship in the world.



The Divine Legend

The mythology of Lord Ayyappa, also known as Dharma Sastha or Manikandan, forms the cornerstone of the legend about the Sabarimala temple. Born from the union of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu (in his avatar as Mohini), Ayyappa's divine birth was destined to defeat the demoness Mahishi, who could only be killed by a child of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Raised by King Rajashekharan of Pandalam, after being found as an infant, Manikandan grew up with divine powers and later embarked on a mission to defeat Mahishi. After accomplishing his divine purpose, Ayyappa returned to the palace riding a tiger, revealing his true identity. Before returning to heaven, he chose the site for the Sabarimala temple, where devotees now flock to honour his legacy and seek blessings.



Plan Your Visit

This guide covers everything you need to know to plan your pilgrimage effectively, from travel routes and the best times to visit to accommodations and facilities available on-site. It ensures a smooth and informed pilgrimage to the sacred shrine.



How to reach

The Lord Ayyappa temple of Sabarimala, located in the forests of Pathanamthitta, sits atop a hill surrounded by mountains and dense forests. Vehicles reach only up to the Pamba, around 5 km away, where devotees take a holy dip before beginning the uphill trek. Strict traditional practices, rituals and dress codes are observed by those visiting the temple.



By air?

Sabarimala, is accessible by road from several international airports. The nearest airports are in Kochi (154 km) and Thiruvananthapuram (170 km), while other options include Kozhikode, Madurai, and Coimbatore. Pilgrims arriving at these airports must complete their journey by rail or road, with distances ranging from 250 to 330 km.

By train?

There is no direct railway line to Sabarimala, but the nearest stations are at Kottayam, Thiruvalla and Chengannur, about 90 km away. Pilgrims from cities like Bengaluru, Coimbatore and Mumbai often disembark at Kottayam. Some trains end at Ernakulam, requiring an additional train journey or road travel to reach Kottayam. Pilgrims can also alight at Alappuzha or Kayamkulam, and travel about 125 km by road. If the journey begins from Thiruvananthapuram, Thiruvalla or Chengannur stations offer the most convenient access to Sabarimala.

By road?

Devotees from Karnataka can reach Sabarimala via Thrissur, travelling about 210 km by road. Those from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh can access the shrine via Coimbatore, Madurai or Kumali, covering distances around 250 km. Pilgrims from Nagercoil can take the Thiruvananthapuram route, while those from Shenkottai can travel through Punaloor and Erumeli. Key routes to Sabarimala include the Erumeli route (61 km), the Vandiperiyar route (95 km) and the easier Chalakkayam route, which is near the Pamba river.



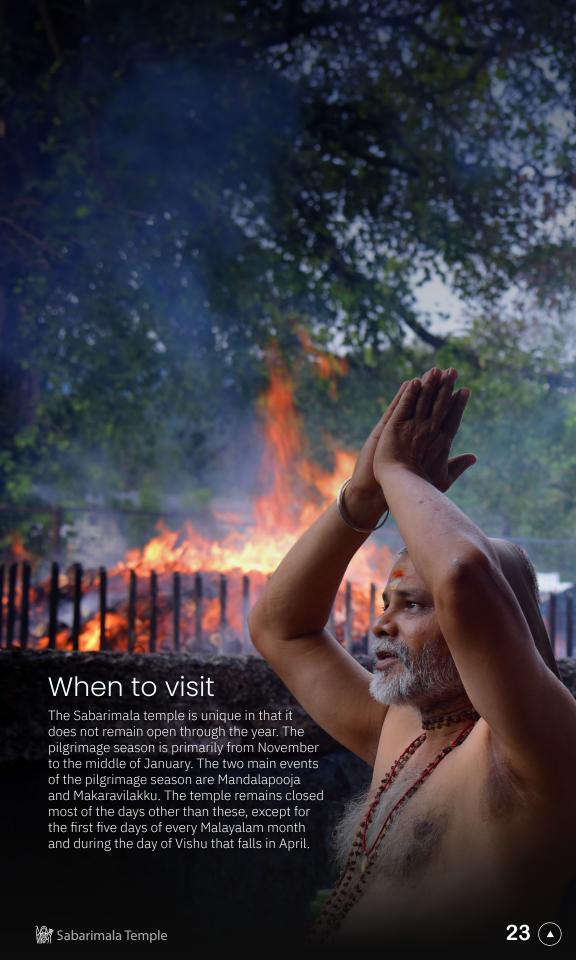
The Erumeli Path

The Erumeli path is a challenging two-day trek covering 50 km through dense forests and rocky terrain, retracing the historic journey of Lord Ayyappa. Key landmarks along the way include Erumeli, where the Pettathullal festival celebrates Ayyappa's victory over Mahishi, and Perur canal, where Kanni Ayyappans [first-time pilgrims to the shrine] bathe before entering the sacred Poonkavanam. Pilgrims pass through significant sites like Irumboonikkara, Araashumudikotta, Kaalaketti, Azhuthanadi and Kallidaamkunnu, each of which holds spiritual and historical importance. The trek includes ascents like Inchipparakotta and Karimala, with resting spots such as Mukkuzhi, before reaching Valiyaanavattom and Cheriyaanavattom near the Pamba river.









Facilities





Special Poojas

From early morning to night, Sabarimala reverberates with hymns, poojas and offerings on select days. Having a better understanding of the routine pooja schedule at the temple will help you plan your visit better.

Neyyabhishekam

Neyyabhishekam is a significant ritual at Sabarimala where the priest anoints the idol of Lord Ayyappa with ghee (offered by devotees), symbolizing the merging of the human soul with the divine. This ritual is conducted from 04:00 AM to 01:00 PM, with ghee-filled coconuts being offered and later returned as prasadam.



Padi Pooja

Padi Pooja is a ritual that honours the 18 sacred steps of Sabarimala, conducted in the evening on specific days. The steps are adorned with flowers, cloth and lamps, and this creates a sacred atmosphere. The ceremony is led by the Tantri and concludes with the aarathi (worship with hand-held, lighted lamps).



Udayasthamana Pooja

Udayasthamana Pooja is an elaborate ceremony performed from sunrise to sunset, symbolizing continuous worship from dawn to dusk. Due to its complexity, it is conducted only on certain days.

Sahasrakalasam

Sahasrakalasam is a ritual offering made to Lord Ayyappa for the welfare of all people, involving the filling of sacred pots with various precious materials and water from holy sources, as per Tantric and Agama Shastra traditions.





Ulsavabali

Ulsavabali is a ritual dedicated to Bhoothaganams, the associates of the presiding deity, involving the sprinkling of cooked rice over sacred stones. It is part of the annual celebration at the Lord Ayyappa temple.



Pushpabhishekam

Pushpabhishekam is the ceremonial showering of flowers upon the idol of Lord Ayyappa, symbolizing devotion and reverence. This ritual requires advance booking by devotees, and uses a variety of flowers and leaves.

Ashtabhishekam

Ashtabhishekam involves offering eight sacred items – Ghee, Vibhuti [holy ash], Milk, Honey, Panchamrutam [a mixture of five ingredients – banana, dates, raisins, sugar and honey], Tender coconut water, Sandalwood paste, and Rosewater — to Lord Ayyappa as part of the ritual.

Kalabhabhishekam

Kalabhabhishekam is a special pooja performed to strengthen the deity's radiance, concluding with the pouring of sandalwood paste on Lord Ayyappa's idol. The ritual involves a procession and is performed during the Ucha Pooja.



Laksharchana

Laksharchana is a ritual where the name of Lord Ayyappa is chanted 100,000 times [laksham in Malayalam] as a collective act of devotion. The ritual concludes with a ceremonial procession and abhishekam at the sanctum sanctorum.

Rituals

Before embarking on the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, devotees observe 41 days of vrutham, involving celibacy and a vegetarian diet. The Kettunira ceremony, where devotees prepare the Irumudi kettu (a twocompartment bag for offerings and personal items), is an essential prepilgrimage ritual.

Mandala Vrutham

Mandala Vrutham is a 41-day period of austerity, when devotees lead a simple life, abstain from worldly pleasures, and wear black to symbolize detachment. This period of discipline prepares them for the pilgrimage.

Malayidal

The Malayidal ritual marks the beginning of Mandala Vrutham, when devotees wear a mala (bead chain) symbolizing their commitment to austerity. This chain is received from a temple priest or a Guru Swamy and is worn until the pilgrimage is completed.



Kettunirakkal

Kettunirakkal is the ritual of preparing the Irumudi kettu, a bag with two compartments, one containing offerings to the Lord, and the other containing personal belongings of the devotee. The ghee-filled coconut in the Irumudi kettu symbolizes spiritual devotion, and only devotees with this bag are allowed to ascend the 18 holy steps to the shrine.

Erumeli Petta Thullal

Erumeli Petta Thullal is a traditional dance ritual commemorating Lord Ayyappa's victory over the demoness Mahishi. Devotees, adorned with leaves and holy ash, perform the dance while carrying symbolic items, with some groups visiting the Vavar mosque as part of the ritual.

Thiruvaabharanam

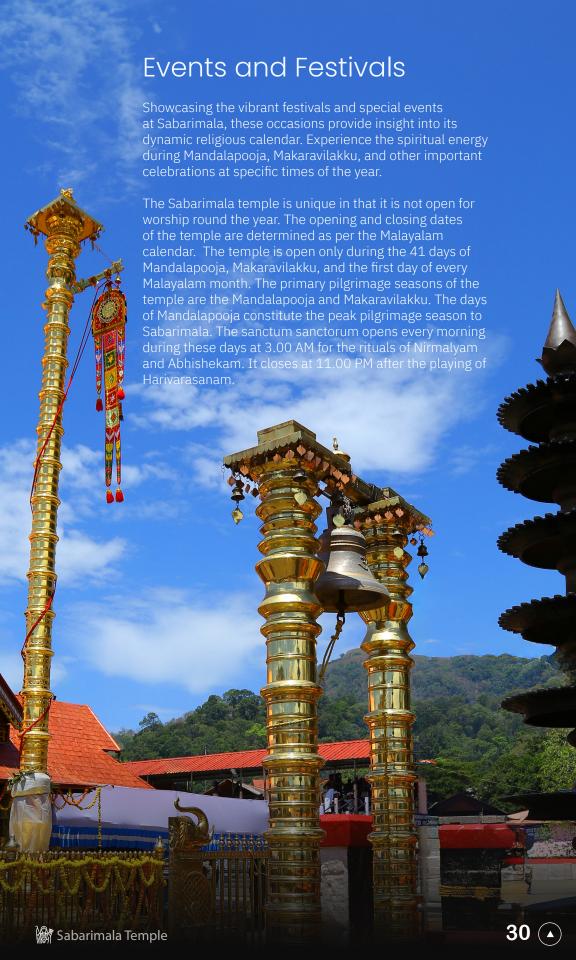
Thiruvaabharanam refers to the sacred gold ornaments used to adorn the idol of Lord Ayyappa during the Makaravilakku festival. These ornaments, kept in the Pandalam palace, are ceremoniously brought to the temple, and placed on the idol before the evening worship.

Thanka Anki

The Thanka Anki, a golden attire gifted by the former Maharaja, is placed on the idol of Lord Ayyappa during the Mandala Pooja. It is brought from the Aranmula temple with great reverence and returned to the temple's strong room after the festival.







Mandalapooja

Mandalapooja marks the beginning of the Sabarimala pilgrimage season, starting in November and lasting 41 days until the Makaravilakku festival in January. Pilgrims observe strict austerities and a disciplined lifestyle during this period.

Makaravilakku

Makaravilakku, celebrated on Makarasankranthi in mid-January, signifies the end of the pilgrimage season. The key rituals include the Makarajyothi at Ponnambalamedu and the Thiruvabharanam procession, through which sacred ornaments of Lord Ayyappa are ceremonially brought to Sannidhanam. During the Sabarimala pilgrimage season, numerous other events and festivals take place across Kerala, many of which have become quite popular and are well worth attending.

Sabarimala Ulsavam



Aazhi Pooja

A ritual symbolizing spiritual purification, it is performed after devotees observe a 41-day penance before undertaking the pilgrimage to Sabarimala.

Makaravilakku Festival

Held in mid-January, this festival features the celestial Makara Jyothi and grand lamp worship, followed by a procession.

Sabarimala Niraputhari

Celebrating agricultural abundance, this festival involves hanging small sheaves of rice grains on the door of the sanctum sanctorum, and is observed with rituals at Sabarimala.

Painkuni Festival

A 10-day festival in March-April, it features grand events like ritual hunting (Pallivetta) and holy bath (Aarattu), starting with flag hoisting

Onam at Sannidhanam

The grand Kerala festival of Onam is celebrated at Sabarimala with special poojas and a feast honouring Lord Ayyappa during August-September.

Prathishta Dinam

This day commemorates the installation of the idol at Sabarimala, with rituals to cleanse and rejuvenate the idol's spiritual energy.

Guruthi

A sacred ceremony held during the Makaravilakku Utsavam, it involves a procession and rituals at the Manimandapam.

Kalamezhuthu

A ritual at the Manimandapam during the Makaravilakku festival, the Kalamezhuthu involves creation of intricate three-dimensional designs with colour powders, depicting Lord Ayyappa's life.





Pamba Sadya

A traditional feast at Pamba for pilgrims after a 41-day fast, it is served before they ascend to Sabarimala, historically linked to certain pilgrim groups.

Pamba Vilakku

Devotees light a lamp in the Pamba river, symbolizing Ayyappa's victory, followed by a feast and the lighting of the tower lamp at Pamba Triveni.

Vishukani

This is a display of auspicious items on Vishu day in April-May, observed by thousands of devotees as the first sight of the new year.



Cultural Insights

Cultural Tips

Gain a deeper understanding of the cultural etiquette, traditions, and the do's and the don'ts of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. These insights will help you navigate the journey with respect and reverence.

Language

Learn basic Malayalam phrases so that interactions with the local people and temple authorities will be easier.

Cuisine

Embrace the simple vegetarian cuisine served along the pilgrimage route, which aligns with the purity of the pilgrimage.

Social Interactions

Respect fellow pilgrims' privacy and religious sentiments, be polite and maintain a quiet demeanour.

Environmental Sensitivity

Given the temple's location within a tiger reserve, follow wildlife guidelines and maintain cleanliness by adhering to the temple's green protocols.



Pilgrimage Support

Accessibility Options

Sabarimala offers special services for elderly and disabled visitors, including dedicated entry points, wheelchair rentals, and resting areas along the route.

Health and Safety

Pilgrims can access emergency medical services, first aid stations, and safety measures like regular patrols and emergency response teams to ensure a safe journey.

FAQ Section

This section answers common questions about the best time to visit, dress codes, provisions for women, essential items to bring, and luggage storage facilities at Pamba.

Digital Galleries

Browse through our carefully curated galleries, featuring videos and photographs that capture the essence of Sabarimala's rituals, festivals and breathtaking surroundings. These are a visual feast that brings the pilgrimage experience to life.













Photo Gallery

Explore a collection of captivating photos that showcase the vibrant rituals, festivals and scenic beauty of Sabarimala, offering a visual insight into the pilgrimage experience.













View more photos

Video Gallery







Thank You

