

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

THEKKADY

The Spice Gardens

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IN 60 SECONDS

A lake that exists because an engineer turned a river east in 1895, a forest the maharajas kept for hunting and India now keeps for tigers, and a border town that smells of cardamom — Thekkady is Periyar.

You will almost certainly not see a tiger: thirty-odd in nine hundred square kilometres of evergreen forest. You will see the lake's drowned trees at half past seven with cormorants on them, probably otters, often elephants if the water is low, and a reserve whose guards were once its poachers. The boat is ₹255 and nobody stands — forty-five people died in 2009 when an overloaded boat with no life jackets tipped as passengers rushed to one rail. Beyond the gate: pepper on living trees, cardamom flowering at your ankles, a kalari pit at six, a cliff where Kerala's waterfalls drop into Tamil Nadu. Refuse the free spice-garden walk; pay a real farm. October to February.

The reserve

925 km²

Kerala's first wildlife sanctuary (1934);
about 30-40 tigers

Best months

Oct – Feb

March-May for animals at the water;
June-July for leeches

Give it

2 days

the dawn boat and a walk, then the
gardens and a show

From Kochi

4½ – 5½ h

150-190 km by road; Madurai 4 h up
the ghat

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I THE RIVER TURNED AROUND · 1886-1895

The Periyar runs west to the sea. In 1886 Travancore leased 8,000 acres of its valley to British India for 999 years at forty thousand rupees a year, and Colonel John Pennycuick of the Royal Engineers built a masonry dam across it through disease, insects and a flood that took the first attempt. It opened on 10 October 1895: a wall 54 metres high that sent the river east through a tunnel to the rain-shadow plains of Madurai. The lake behind it is Thekkady. On the Tamil side farmers still garland Pennycuick's statue on his birthday, which falls on Pongal; that he sold his own property to finish the dam is the story they tell.

II THE DAM BETWEEN TWO STATES · 1947 —

The dam stands wholly in Kerala and is run by Tamil Nadu under the lease. Kerala says an 1895 lime-and-surkhi wall in a seismic zone should be replaced — a United Nations University report put 3.5 million people in its path; Tamil Nadu says it is sound and the water is theirs by an agreement older than either state. The level was cut to 136 feet in 1979 after a dam failed in Gujarat; the Supreme Court allowed 142 in 2006 and 2014. In August 2026 the two states were still arguing, and the court's 142 feet still held. From the boat, all you see is the lake.

III THE MAHARAJA'S HUNT BECOMES A TIGER RESERVE · 1899-1978

In 1899 the forest around the new lake was reserved to keep tea planters out of the rajas' hunting ground. Game warden S.C.H. Robinson was appointed in 1933 and the Nellikkampatty sanctuary followed in 1934 under Maharaja Chithira Thirunal; a wildlife sanctuary in 1950, Project Tiger in 1978, the core a national park in 1982. The maharajas' retreat on its promontory is the Lake Palace hotel; the officials' lodge was opened to travellers by Nehru, who named it Aranya Nivas in 1963. Today: 925 square kilometres, both the Periyar and the Pamba rising inside it, and a place in the Western Ghats World Heritage listing.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 The spike

On a pepper vine at eye level: a hanging spike with berries turning from green to red at its base — harvest begins when the first one or two redden, December to February.

2 The flower at your feet

At the base of a cardamom clump, under shade: pale lilac flowers and green three-sided pods along the ground.

3 The red lace

Ask the farmer to open a nutmeg fruit — mace wrapped around the seed against the yellow flesh.

4 The hand pollinator

On a vanilla vine in flowering season, a worker with a sliver of bamboo or a toothpick pollinating each flower by hand.

5 The curing house

At a real estate — Murikkady, Anakkara, Gavi's KFDC unit — the drying room where green cardamom loses its water; not at the roadside gardens.

One more thing

Pay a named working farm — Abraham's, or your homestay's estate — and leave through the gate. The free gardens on the Munnar road end at an ayurvedic counter with your driver on commission. Buy in Kumily market by the kilo, and ask the price at Puttady that morning.

01 ARRIVAL

The lake at half past seven

The 07:30 boat from the Periyar boat landing — ask for a front seat when you board; report at Anavachal by 06:30 · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Jackets → trunks → mist

02 THE SHORE

Elephants at the water, if the forest decides

From the boat · Morning · 1x · landscape · 2x

Rail or arm → water → animals on the grass

03 THE OTTERS

Otters on a dead trunk

From the boat · Late morning · 1x · landscape · 2x

Trunk → otters → reflection

04 THE VINE

Pepper on a living post

Abraham's Spice Garden at Spring Valley · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Hand → spike → trunk

05 THE CLUMP

Cardamom flowers at your ankles

A cardamom clump under canopy shade at a working farm or a Murikkady estate · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Pods → crouched family → clump

06 THE FRUIT

A nutmeg split open

Any spice farm with a nutmeg tree — ask the farmer to open one · Late morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Hands → open fruit → child's face