

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

VARKALA

The Cliff Coast

No. KL-05 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

A red-and-ochre cliff with cafés on its lip, a beach below where Hindus give their dead to the sea, a reformer's monastery behind, and a canal tunnel through the ridge — Varkala is Kerala's only cliff coast, and it is crumbling.

The cliff is a national geological monument: twenty-odd million years of sand, clay and lignite under a laterite cap, springs falling from its face, sixty-nine cafés within ten metres of its edge. Papanasam below is where ashes are immersed; Janardanaswamy above is two thousand years old by tradition; Sivagiri, three kilometres inland, is where Narayana Guru preached one caste, one religion, one god. The sea is the real danger — swim only between the flags, never at dusk — and the edge the second. Surf October to April; come October to February.

The cliff

23 – 2.6 Ma

India's 27th National Geological Monument, 2014–15

Best months

Oct – Feb

surf Oct–Apr; most cliff cafés shut June–September

Give it

2–3 days

cliff and beach; Sivagiri and the tunnel; Anjengo, Kappil

From Trivandrum

1 – 1½ h

airport 45–55 km; 54 trains a day stop here

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I THE SIN-DESTROYING SHORE · tradition to the 1600s

Papanasam means redemption from sin: a dip washes away papam, and Hindus bring their dead's ashes here and feed their ancestors — which is why the town is Dakshin Kashi, the Benares of the south. Janardanaswamy on the hillock is two thousand years old by the telling — a Pandya king, told in a dream to search the shore, found the idol floating in flowers — and twelfth-century in stone; the only firm date is a renovation under Umayamma Rani in 1677–84. Its bells, the story goes, were vowed by a Dutch captain becalmed offshore, and carry the names Peter von Belson and Michelle Evarald.

II A PAGE OF THE MIO-PLIOCENE · 23 – 2.6 million years

The cliff is the only place on India's west coast where sediments of that age stand exposed: sandstones and grit, plastic clays, thin seams of lignite that were Miocene forest, under a laterite cap three or four metres thick, stained off-white, yellow, ochre, red and brown by iron. Where the cap ends, water falls out of the face as springs the town calls medicinal. The Geological Survey notified it as the country's twenty-seventh National Geological Monument in 2014–15; in 2025 it went on UNESCO's tentative list — not the World Heritage list.

III THE GURU ON THE HILL · 1856–1928

Narayana Guru was born to an Ezhava family in 1856, in a Kerala where caste fixed how near a temple a person might stand. In 1888 he consecrated a Shiva at Aruvippuram himself — 'not a Brahmin Shiva but an Ezhava Shiva'. In 1904 he settled at Sivagiri, three kilometres inland, and opened a school for lower-caste children; his Sarada temple of 1912 has windows, which temples did not, and no tantric ritual. Tagore came in 1922, Gandhi in 1925. He sanctioned a pilgrimage in January 1928 — eight aims, pilgrims in turmeric yellow — and died that September. Every 30 December to 1 January the yellow crowds come.

Stand here. Look for this.

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

1 The cap

The dark, pitted crust along the top of the face — laterite, three or four metres of it, the roof of the whole cliff.

2 The bands

Below the cap, the colours: off-white sandstone, yellow and ochre grit, red and brown clays — iron staining, not paint.

3 The black threads

Thin dark seams within the pale beds — lignite, Miocene forest compressed to coal that never quite became coal.

4 The springs

Where the cap ends and the face goes damp and green: water falling out of the sandstone; pipes and bottles below it.

5 The cut

Near the Bali Mandapam, the slope the earthmovers made in June 2024 — raw, unlayered, the argument made visible.

One more thing

Read the cliff from the beach at low tide in the first hour of light, when the sun behind it leaves the face in shadow and the bands read cleanly; photograph it from the water's edge, not the lip. Keep children back from the top, especially at the helipad and after rain.

01 ARRIVAL

The path before the shutters

The North Cliff path · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Path → family → sea and shutters

02 THE LAYERS

The cliff read from the sand

Papanasam beach at low tide · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Child at the foot → bands → laterite cap

03 THE TEMPLE

The bells and the banyan

Janardanaswamy temple courtyard · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Banyan → family → copper dome

04 THE RITES

Papanasam, from a distance

From the cliff path above Papanasam's ritual end · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 2x

Beach → small white figures → sea

05 SIVAGIRI

The temple with windows

Sivagiri Mutt · Late morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Family → steps → white octagon

06 THE TUNNEL

The mouth in the ridge

The canal bank at the Sivagiri end of the tunnel · Late morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Child → water → brick arch