

South India Women-only Cultural Tour

Itinerary dates: February 26 – March 9, 2019

Tour Escort: Beth Whitman

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore **fantastical temples and caves** from the 7th century
- Soak up the former French colonial town of **Pondicherry**
- Learn the intricacies of **South Indian cuisine** in two cooking classes
- Visit the idyllic **tea-growing region of Munnar**
- Overnight on a lovely **air-conditioned houseboat** in Kerala
- Enjoy unique **4- and 5-star hotels**, which make perfect places to rest after your days in India
- Returning WanderTours participants receive a **5% discount on land cost**

The adventure starts in Chennai on February 26, 2019. You'll be met at the airport and driven to Mahabalipuram, about an hour away and where the tour officially begins.

Alternately, if you'd like to arrive early in Chennai, we can arrange additional nights at a hotel so you can explore the city on your own or we can arrange a guide for you. You can then meet up with the group for Day 1 of the itinerary.

ITINERARY

Day 1

Tuesday, February 26, 2019 – Arrive in Chennai – Mahabalipuram

Meals: Dinner

Upon arrival in **Chennai**, you will be met by a driver and taken to our hotel in **Mahabalipuram** (about an hour away). If you arrive in time for dinner, it is included on this day at the hotel.

Overnight in Mahabalipuram at [Ideal Beach Resort](#) or similar.

 **HIGHLIGHT!** Mahabalipuram is a small **seaside village** that was once the main port of the region. Today, it is a wonderful place to relax in order to get ready for your South India adventure!

Day 2

Wednesday, February 27, 2019 – Mahabalipuram – Pondicherry

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll enjoy a tour of the amazing temples in this region, including the **Shore Temple**, which overlooks the Bay of Bengal, as well as the **Five Rathas**, known as the temple chariots. These were built in the **late 7th century** and each created from just **one large granite stone**.

We'll then proceed to the French Colonial town of **Pondicherry** (about two hours away) where we'll have lunch.

In the afternoon, we'll tour the **French Quarter** as well as **Sri Aurobindo Ashram**. We'll have a chance to wander around and visit some of the many **shops and cafes** in this area.

We'll then proceed to nearby **Auroville**, a fascinating **experimental community** founded in the late 60s.

Dinner and overnight at a [guesthouse in Auroville](#). (Link shows several examples of guest houses in Auroville, but is not specifically to where we'll be staying.)



HIGHLIGHT! Pondicherry is a former French colony and, as such, is a **unique destination in India**. It's known as the **French Riviera of the East** and is filled with unique **shops, markets and cafes**, many of which are **European-influenced**.

Day 3

Thursday, February 28, 2019 – Pondicherry

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After an early breakfast, we'll visit the **Matrimandir**, the globe-like structure located at the **heart of Auroville**. Here we'll have a chance to **meditate, relax** and enjoy "**silent concentration**." After soaking up the peaceful vibes, we'll have lunch on the property.

We'll then tour **Auroville** to learn firsthand what this "**City of Dawn**" is all about. On the property is a community of approximately **2,500 people from around the world**. Here they have farms, businesses, music stores and more, all while **practicing peace!**

Dinner and overnight at a [guesthouse in Auroville](#). (Link shows several examples of guest houses in Auroville, but is not specifically to where we'll be staying.)



HIGHLIGHT! Auroville was created in the **mid-1960s** and is considered the first and only internationally endorsed ongoing **experiment in human unity transformation of consciousness**. It was established by The Mother (with help from Sri Aurobindo) and is prepared to accommodate up to 50,000 people!

Day 4

Friday, March 1, 2019 – Pondicherry – Trichy – Chettinad

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll have a long drive to Chettinad (about six hours away) with stops for lunch and to visit a **temple in Trichy**.

Which temple we visit depends on whether any **festivals** are taking place on this day. Our guide will help determine whether we visit **Rock Fort Temple** or **Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple**. Rock Fort is Trichy's most famous landmark and an important pilgrimage site for Hindus while **Sri Ranganathaswamy** is a large and finely detailed 237-foot-tall temple.

Dinner and overnight at [CGH Visalam](#) or similar in Chettinad.

Day 5

Saturday, March 2, 2019 – Chettinad

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll partake in a **temple tour** of Chettinad.

The temples in this area are from the **early Tamil dynasties** and built by wealthy sponsors after the **royal families lost their fortunes**. Even today, much of Chettinad's daily activities center around **festivities** at the temples, each one with its **own unique deity**. There are many famous temples here and we'll rely on our guide to determine which are the best ones to visit when we're in town based on any **activities/festivals** that might be taking place.

This afternoon, we'll take part in a **hands-on cooking class** and then eat what we have prepared!

Dinner and overnight at [CGH Visalam](#) or similar in Chettinad.



HIGHLIGHT! Chettinad is well-known for its **distinct cuisine**, which relies on a **variety of spices** and dishes made with **fresh ground masalas**. YUM!

Day 6

Sunday, March 3, 2019 – Chettinad – Madurai

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll drive onward to Madurai (about two hours away).

Madurai is the third largest city in Tamil Nadu and one of the **oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world**. It is most famous for its temples and is one of India's most prominent Hindu pilgrimage centers.

Upon arrival, we'll check in to our hotel and then have some **free time** in the afternoon to relax as the evening will be quite busy.

After an early dinner, we'll visit **Thirumalai Nayak Palace** and **Shree Meenakshi Temple**. This temple is literally a city—one of the largest and oldest of its kind in India. Here, we'll enjoy an evening of **religious prayer** and **temple music**.

Overnight in at [Gateway Pasumalai by Taj](#) or similar in Madurai.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** Madurai is best known for the magnificent **Meenakshi Temple**, a **2,000 year-old structure** found within an enormous complex and that is a **major pilgrimage destination** for Hindus.

Day 7

Monday, March 4, 2019 – Madurai – Munnar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After an early breakfast, we'll drive onward to Munnar (about five hours away), which has some of the **world's highest tea growing estates**. Along the way, we'll see **villages** and **rolling green plantations** as we make our way up into **tea country**. It's difficult to imagine so far south, but Munnar is approximately 5,000 feet in altitude! The **views from the hilltops are stunning**, particularly at sunset.

Dinner and overnight at [Tea County Hotel](#) or similar in Munnar.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** Munnar is an **idyllic hill station** with its velvet lawns and exotic flora and fauna. Breathing in **fresh, cool mountain air** is a rare experience in India and you'll have plenty of it here.

Day 8

Tuesday, March 5, 2019 – Munnar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Today we'll visit nearby **Eravikulam National Park**, located in the high ranges of Idukki District. The park covers nearly 40 square miles over **high rolling plateaus**.

The park is best known for its large population of the endangered **Nilgiri Tahr**—an ibex whose numbers are estimated at around 700—but it also has **elephants, Nilgiri martens, otters, mongoose, dusky striped squirrels** and more than 120 species of birds.

Dinner and overnight at [Tea County Hotel](#) or similar in Munnar.

Day 9

Wednesday, March 6, 2019 – Munnar – Alleppey

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll continue on to **Alleppey** (about five hours away). We'll arrive in time for lunch on board our houseboat(s)!

In the afternoon, we'll meander along **Kerala's network of rivers** (commonly referred to as the backwaters) in our houseboats to experience life on the river.

Just before sunset, we'll tie up for the night and have dinner on-board.

Overnight in the backwaters on board a houseboat.

Dinner and overnight at Tea County Hotel or similar in Munnar.

 **HIGHLIGHT!** These are **no ordinary houseboats**. You'll have your own private room (unless you're sharing) with air conditioning and a private bathroom. **Food is prepared fresh on board** by an excellent chef and you'll enjoy the peace and quiet while listening to the water lapping against the boat.

Day 10

Thursday, March 7, 2019 – Alleppey – Kochi

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following a lovely **fresh breakfast on board the boat**, we'll drive to **Kochi** (about one and a half hours away). Upon arrival, we'll check in to the hotel.

We'll have lunch at the hotel and then the afternoon will be **free for relaxing by the pool** or shopping in town (easily within walking distance).

In the late afternoon, we'll go to a traditional Kathakali dance show! We'll first get to see the dancers and musicians applying their **elaborate makeup and costumes** before the actual performance.

Overnight in Kochi at [Old Harbour Hotel](#) or similar.

Dinner and overnight at Tea County Hotel or similar in Munnar.

 **HIGHLIGHT!** Kathakali is a **traditional dance form** in Kerala. The impressive **facial expressions, hand gestures** and **dance** moves are all integral to the storytelling.

Day 11

Thursday, March 7, 2019 – Alleppey – Kochi

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Today we'll tour the town of Kochi!

Our day begins with a visit to the **Jewish Synagogue**. Built in 1568, it's the oldest synagogue in India and was built by the prosperous Jewish trading community. The floors were paved in the mid-18th century using exquisite handpainted blue willow tiles from China. We'll then continue on to the **Dutch Palace**, notable for some of the **best mythological murals** in India.

Next stop will be **St Francis Church**, the **oldest European church** in India, and then nearby **Santa Cruz Basilica**, considered to be one of the **finest and most impressive churches** in India.

We'll have lunch in town and, in the afternoon, we'll see the iconic **Chinese fishing nets** that are unique to Kochi (they aren't even found in China!). Our tour ends with a visit to **Fort**

Cochin—a small community in itself. Since it is a natural harbor and one of the most important trade centers in South India, this is one of the most important towns in the state.

Tonight for our final dinner, we're in for a real treat! We'll first walk through a **local bazaar** with our hosts for the evening to learn about **traditional ingredients in Keralite cuisine**. We'll then **visit their home** for a traditional South Indian cuisine cooking demonstration and we'll get to **eat what was prepared!**

Overnight in Kochi at [Old Harbour Hotel](#) or similar.

 **HIGHLIGHT!** Kochi is a vibrant city situated on the southwest coast of the Indian Peninsula in the **breathhtakingly scenic and prosperous state** of Kerala.

Day 12

Saturday, March 9, 2019 – Kochi

Meals: Breakfast

After breakfast, we'll check out of the hotel and head to the airport for our flights home or to your next destination.

**** Itinerary subject to change without notice.**