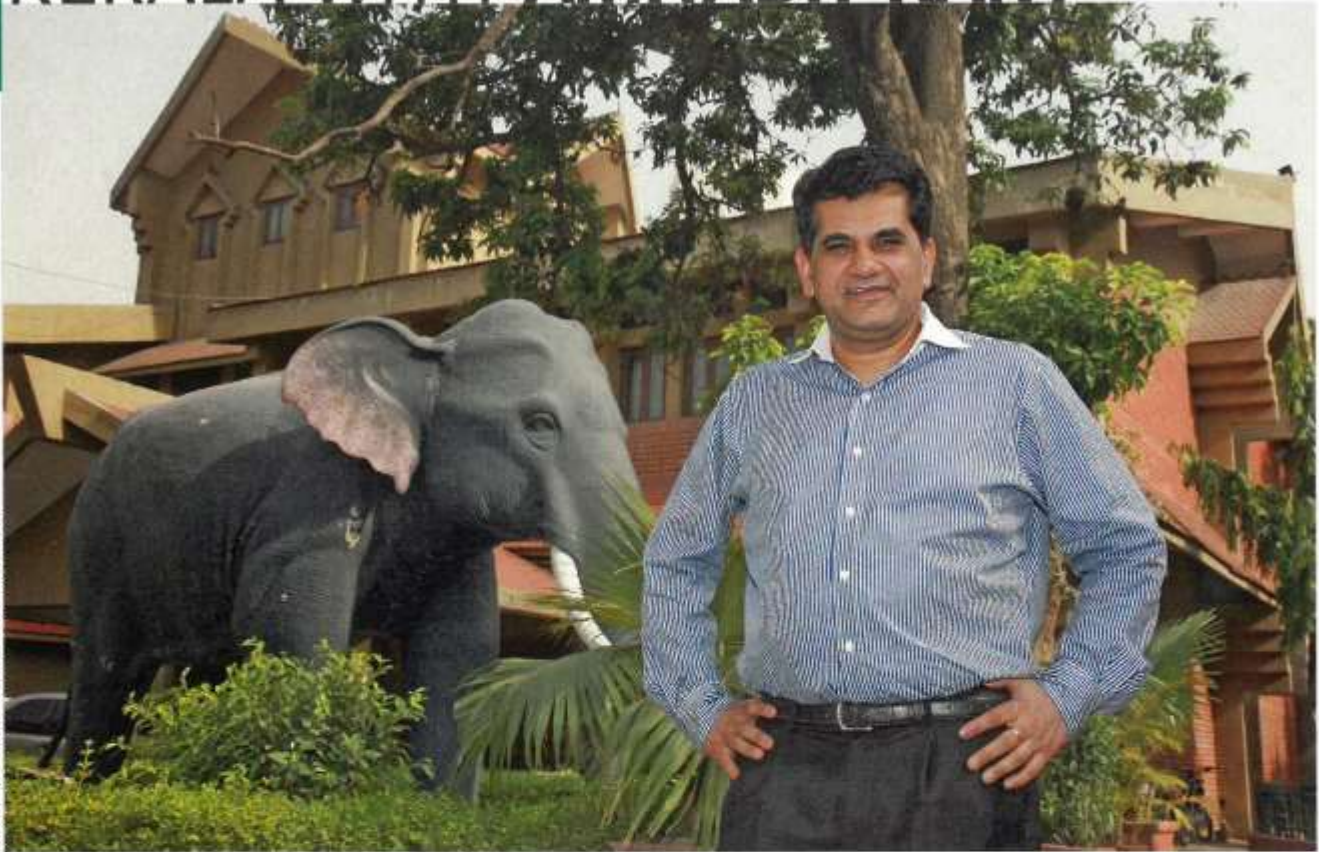


## KERALA WITH AMITABH KANT



SATISH KAUSHIK/WWW.INDIA/TODAYIMAGES.COM

He is the man who gave us the three magic words: God's Own Country, a brand that swept tourists off their feet. No one knows Kerala better than **AMITABH KANT** who also led the hugely successful Incredible India campaign

**Y**ear 1981. It was the year I was first posted to Kerala, as sub-collector at Thalassery, in the Malabar region. I was given a house on top of a hillock, facing the Thalassery fort. It was a unique structure, built during the days of the Raj by Lord Wellesley, who later became the Duke of

Wellington. And it was in this house, while watching the rainclouds close in on us, that I first fell in love with Kerala, the unique state that later pulled off a tourism coup in the world as 'God's Own Country'.

More than 10 years later, as the collector of Calicut (now Kozhikode), I did my first bit to enhance Kerala's immense tourism potential—build a new

airport and then expand it. I next focused on creating a green belt in the heart of Calicut town, beautifying the area with parks and walkways. And then came the Malabar Mahotsav, a cultural event that became an avenue for artists and performers from all over the country to come and experience the many charms of Kerala.



KERALA TOURISM



## BEAUTY WITHIN

It's difficult to say what exactly drew me to the state at first sight. I would say that the easy, laidback pace of life is certainly one of the biggest draws. The same goes for the soothing green that envelops you—considering that I have spent most of my life in the plain of Uttar Pradesh and then in the city of Delhi. Nature is at its luxuriant best in Kerala, that thin strip of land that, from tip to tip, is a complete tourist destination, with the life of people very much a part of its allure. The people of Kerala have always fascinated me. The fact that they are almost always clad in shades of white makes them more attractive in my eyes. To me, white is symbolic of purity.

## PERSONAL TOUCH

My fascination for Kerala has also a very personal reason. As the secretary of tourism, government of Kerala, I was given the task of building the state's tourism potential. The result was the successful brand called 'God's Own

Country'. Imagine my personal satisfaction when Kerala won global recognition as 'one of the ten exotic paradises of the world' in *National Geographic Traveler's* millennium collectors' issue.

## RAINDROPS AND FESTIVALS

Kerala is certainly at her best during the monsoons. There is something magical about the rains here. As we all know the state receives the country's first monsoon showers and the land comes alive with newfound energy.

Onam is another time I treasure. One can't overlook Kerala during Onam and the best way to celebrate it is with the boat races the state is synonymous with. Call it a ballet or a symphony, the sheer energy of the races never fails to surprise me.

## WATER WORLD

I think the strong element of water anywhere you go in Kerala works magic for its image as a destination. It has the backwaters, the beaches,

lazy canals that run around villages, waterfalls in the hills... This adds a certain calm, placidity to its touristic charm. And then of course there are the other elements that also make Kerala the unbeatable destination—culture, cuisine, arts, ayurveda and people.

## COOKING UP STORMS

Speaking of food, I must confess that I am hooked on the fabulous Moplah cuisine. And the best Moplah spread I have eaten is at Ayesha Manzil, a beautiful colonial-style mansion at Thalassery. The property, now a popular homestay, is run by Moosa and his wife Faiza, one of the first families I befriended in Kerala. In fact my wife took her first lessons in Kerala cooking from Faiza.

I still visit Moosa and Faiza at least once every year—as much for the beauty of Ayesha Manzil, which overlooks the Arabian Sea, as Faiza's culinary prowess. Her fish paranthas and *motta mala* (garland made of egg yolk) are simply divine!

## KERALA, MY STYLE

If I were to build a Kerala itinerary for you it would be thus: Begin at Calicut, explore the twin charms of the sea and a great culture (*kalaripayattu*, ayurveda and the works); then, move to Wayanad, the wild, untamed beauty that is great for both the nature lover and the wildlife enthusiast. At Wayanad, I recommend a stay in a treehouse at Vythiri Resort—it is an unparalleled experience. Next on the list is Kannur, which is where you get to see *theyyam*, a dance form that, sadly, is still overshadowed by *kathakali*. The backwaters is what you should do next, complete with the houseboat experience. And then you should move to Munnar with its lovely, sprawling tea plantations. An estate tour is a must, so is a round of golf and a stay at a planter's bungalow.

1. Stay in a houseboat on the backwaters
2. Waterfalls are another big attraction in Kerala
3. Wildlife in Wayanad
4. Snake boat races are big tourist draws





# PLUS PICK: KERALA



Zuri Kumarakom

## STAY

### Zuri Kumarakom Resort & Spa

On the banks of Lake Vembanad, this 18-acre resort comes with all the frills of a five-star property—plush villas with private pools, cottages and deluxe rooms in tranquil landscaped setting. And the energetic, courteous staff will charm you such that you will remember their names long after you have returned from the heart of Kerala's backwater country.

Tel: (0481) 252 7292;  
www.zurihotels.com

### Rainforest Athirapally

Somewhere in the middle of the Sholayar mountain range, in the middle of a forest about an hour from Kochi, the Chalakudy river gushes down in the form of a stunning waterfall. And right in front of it is the boutique hotel Rainforest Athirapally, a nine-room quaint place whose luxury lies in its location. The staff is cheerful and friendly, always coming up for a chat is they see you alone.

Tel: (0484) 411 8000; e-mail: reservation@avenuehotels.in

### Malabar House, Fort Kochi

This 18th-century colonial bungalow is a lovely little luxury hotel. Interiors combine colonial with contemporary: strong accents of colour and antique objets d'art; punkhas hang in the airy rooms and four-poster beds comfort you to sleep. A pool in the courtyard, riverside terraces and its restaurant Malabar Junction... this one deserves its place among India's best hotels.

Tel: (0484) 216 666;  
www.malabarhouse.com



Jewish food at Koder House

## EAT

### Jewish Food at Koder House, Fort Kochi

The Koder House in Fort Kochi is where you will get the best Jewish spread in Kerala, if not the whole country. The *piece-de-resistance* is the fish ball curry, which is best eaten with pulao. Another main course delight is *kubba*, similar to Arabic *kofta*. But before that, there's *pastel*, a light rice pancake with vegetables or meat stuffing.

www.koderhouse.com

### Syrian Christian Food at Philipkutty's Farm

This cosy nook in Kumarakom is where you can try your hand at local dishes and even eat them. The menu will have the best of Syrian Christian specialities like duck roast, *karimeen fry*, beef chilli fry, scampi and so on. Don't forget the toddy.

www.philipkuttysfarm.com

### Sadya at temples

Any temple town in Kerala is a good place to have the *sadya*, a feast had on plantain leaf, especially served during marriages and festivals. You may find as many as 40 vegetarian dishes—*pullisseri* (thin curry of spiced buttermilk), *avial*, *thoran* (made of vegetables like cabbage, beans, drumstick and yam), *erisseri* (curry of banana or yam) and so on. Round off the meal with *paal payasam*.



KERALA TOURISM



Spices from Jew Town

## SHOP

### Spices from Jew Town, Kochi

A mild fragrance wafts through the lanes of Jew Town as shops of all sizes entice you with an amazing spread of spices—cardamom, cinnamon, black pepper, nutmeg, fenugreek and so on. Buy these at wholesale prices. Don't forget the containers in wood or stone. Nice decoration for the table!

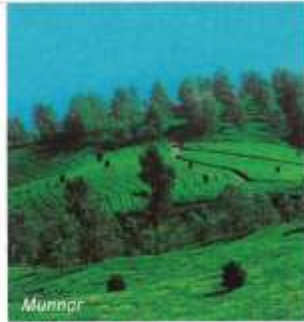
### Kasavu

The Kerala cotton sari, in all its simplicity and elegance, comes in the same league as the Bengal muslin and the Banarasi brocade. Buy the nine yards with golden borders from Balamapuram, 13 km from Thiruvananthapuram. Kasavukada, a popular chain across Kerala, is also a good option.



### Red Gold Jewellery from Thrissur

Gold with a tinge of red—Kerala's traditional jewellery comes in a range of intricate designs. And Thrissur, which manufactures 70 per cent of the state's gold, is also the best place to go shopping for jewellery. For the traditional look, go for the Kerala *odiyannam* (belt) and *kashimala* (long chain with coins). Alukkas (www.alukkas.com) is a good bet for chic and contemporary designs. If you want more places to look at, there are at least 50 more shops within a two-km radius around M.O. Road and Town Hall Road.



Munnar

KERALA TOURISM

## SEE

### Munnar

Come anytime and Munnar will welcome you with whispering winds, soft rains and misty mountains. The slopes are a nicely laden green carpet of tea plantations. A must-see for its colonial buildings, planters' clubs, lakes and dams. Drive to Top Station, a good place to catch a glimpse of *Neelakurunji*, an orchid that blooms once in every 12 years.

130 km from Kochi

### Periyar

Sprawled over 777 sq km, Periyar is one of India's best preserved tiger reserves. The centrepiece is the Periyar lake. The beauty of the still lake at this old tiger reserve is accentuated by the bare tree stumps jutting out of the water every few metres. Opt for the Periyar Tiger Trail and stay in tents in the middle of the jungle. Tiger or no tiger, it is a great experience.

4 hours by road from Kochi

### Bekal Fort

The beauty of Bekal, in Kasaragod district, is that it juts out right into the Arabian Sea. This 17th-century fort, is round in shape and seemed to have been used purely as a position of defence, gauging from the number of apertures in the wall to aim at the enemy from. It isn't very clear who originally built, but Tipu Sultan did use it, even constructing a mosque nearby. Climb the observation tower for magnificent sea views and go into the underground passages. 75 km from Mangalore