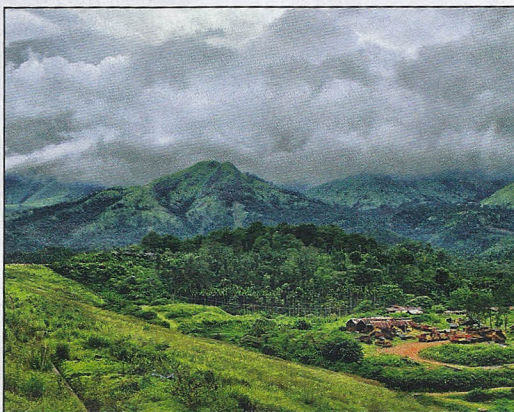


This week's dream: escaping the crowds in northern Kerala

Kerala has become so popular among foreigners "seeking a laid-back tropical paradise" that parts of it are now congested with tourists and scarred by sprawling resorts. But the north of the Indian state is a region apart, says Francesca Angelini in *The Sunday Times* – a place of "deserted" beaches (the state's best) and "misty mountains" where tigers roam and few outsiders venture. Even the backwaters – the network of lagoons and canals that forms one of the state's most famous attractions – are relatively unvisited.

Most international flights land in Cochin, and from there it's a five-hour journey "on the timeless joy that is an Indian train" to the former colonial port of Tellicherry. The Ayisha Manzil homestay there is an 1860s colonial house built by one Murdoch Brown of the East India Company; and its landlady Faiza Moosa serves the best homecooked Muslim Malabar food in Kerala. Guests are taken on guided tours of the local fish market, and to see a



The view from Banasura Sagar Dam in Wayanad

theyyam, a Hindu ritual in which villagers "stitched into 3ft-wide peacock-like mirrored costumes" are transmogrified into gods and dance like whirling dervishes to the frenzied accompaniment of firecrackers and drums.

High in the jungles of the Western Ghat mountains you'll find Vythiri Resort, where guests stay in tree houses complete with hot tubs. There are waterfalls to swim beneath nearby, and myriad wildlife to see: this district, Wayanad, is home to 203 bird species and 45 varieties of mammal, including the dog-sized Malabar squirrel. But the ideal place to round off a trip is down by the Arabian Sea – the Neeleshwar

Hermitage, not far away. Its thatched bungalows and infinity pool sit beside a palm-lined beach, and the Ayurvedic treatments on offer will leave you feeling "transformed". *Audley Travel* (01993-838355, www.audleytravel.com) has a ten-day trip from £2,450pp, incl. flights.

Hotel of the week



Point Yamu, Phuket, Thailand

The latest addition to Singaporean hotelier Christina Ong's COMO group, Point Yamu is a "secluded" haven of calm just 20 minutes' drive from Phuket town, says Condé Nast Traveller. Situated on a headland in Phang Nga Bay, the hotel has serene interiors by the Italian designer Paola Navone: these are "lofty", uncluttered and pale, though punctuated with flashes of turquoise and blue. Because of the elevation, a constant breeze ripples across the big pool terrace. The only downside is that the beach club is a boat trip away, on a nearby island, but getting there is fun.

Doubles from £285 b&b. 00 66 7636 0100, www.comohotels.com/pointyamu

Getting the flavour of...

A safari renaissance in Rwanda

Tourism has played a key part in Rwanda's recovery from the genocide of 20 years ago – and nowhere has it wrought a greater transformation than in the Akagera National Park, says Sophy Roberts in the FT. The country's only savannah reserve contains an extraordinary range of habitats – from rolling hills covered in acacia bushes to riverine forests and vast stretches of protected wetland. Overrun by returning refugees in the mid-1990s, the reserve was devastated by poaching and overgrazing; but the tide is now turning: wild game numbers have quadrupled in the past three years alone. Stay, if you can, at the new Ruzizi Tented Lodge, which sits beside Lake Ihema near to where Henry Morgan Stanley camped in 1876. The surroundings have "an enduring emptiness" – making this as beautiful a safari destination "as you could wish for". *Passage to Africa* (00 27 15 793 0811, www.passagetoafrica.com) has a week-long Rwanda trip from £3,500pp.

Cycling the Lithuanian seaboard

A sandy strip just 60 miles long, bordered by dunes, forests and lush pastures, Lithuania's Baltic coast is the perfect place for a gentle cycling holiday, says Adam Ruck in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Highlights include Klaipeda (formerly Memel) "an up-at-heel university town, timber-framed and

cobbled"; the island of Rusne, with its "folklorish traditions"; and Nida, the main resort on the Curonian Spit – a strip of land that reaches miles out into the sea. Thomas Mann built a summer house here in 1930, now open to the public and stuffed with intriguing memorabilia. *The Carter Company* (01296-631671, www.the-carter-company.com) has a five-day trip, at about 20 miles a day, from £595pp, excl. flights.

A Durham treasure trove

The Bowes Museum was built in the mid-19th century to bring "some of the world's finest treasures" to the people of County Durham, and this "eclectic" and "personal" collection delivers magnificently on that promise, says Fiona Bruce in *The Daily Telegraph*. Its founders, the coal magnate John Bowes and his wife Joséphine, a French actress, died before work on the building – a French château perched incongruously on the edge of the market town of Barnard Castle – was finished. But the artefacts within are theirs – the fruits of one of history's great shopping sprees. The museum contains fine paintings by Corot, El Greco and Van Dyck – but its real charm lies in its more eccentric objects. These include a life-sized silver swan, a "miraculous" 18th century musical automaton which comes to life at 2pm each day. Open daily 10am-5pm (01833-690606, www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk).

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

Tuition in Montefalco

There's 10% off a week's stay at Villa Pambuffetti, with painting or photography tuition. £1,363pp, incl. most meals, transfers. 0808-118 5729, info@learningholidaysinitaly.com. Arrive 22 June.

Images of Sri Lanka

Sightseeing in Colombo and Kandy, and a Minneriya jeep safari, costs from £1,349pp for a 9-day trip, mixed board with flights and guide. 0844-417 3465, www.virginholidaysjourneys.co.uk. Dep 17 May.

US train tour and cruise

Travel from New York to Fort Lauderdale by train, then embark on a 7-night full-board cruise on the Caribbean Princess. From £1,499pp + flights. 0800-082 2186, www.jetlinecruise.com. Dep 25 May.

Couples' break in Yorkshire

Spinners (sleeps 4) is a spacious detached cottage in the pretty village of Well, and a week's stay from 9 May costs £349 (dogs welcome). 01228-406701, www.yorkshirecottages.info.