

TRACKS SAFARIS

WE GET YOU CLOSER



18 Night Wildlife and Culture of Southern India

Destinations: Chennai – Mahabalipuram – Puducherry – Thanjavur – Pollachi – Masinagudi – Kabini – Bengaluru



The term south India is used largely for states that are part of peninsular India. These are the states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. South India is bounded by the Bay of Bengal in the east, the Arabian Sea in the west and the Indian Ocean in the south.

The geography of the region is diverse with two mountain ranges - the Western and Eastern Ghats, bordering the plateau heartland. Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, Tungabhadra and Vaigai rivers are important non-perennial sources of water. These diverse landscapes bring with it different cultures and customs, different culinary tastes, architecture and flora & fauna.

In this program we will explore two of these five states. We shall explore the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. In our journey we shall explore heritage, architecture, traditions, customs & rituals, culinary delights, arts & crafts along with performing arts. We shall also introduce you to the varied landscapes and diverse wildlife found in this region. India is home to about 870 endemic species and a large number of them can be found in the western ghats & Nilgiri hills which we shall be visiting. These rich cultural and natural heritage will be showcases in the destinations that we have selected: Chennai, Mahabalipuram, Puducherry, Thanjavur, Pollachi, Valparai, Masinagudi and Kabini.



DAY ONE

On arrival into Chennai International Airport our representative will meet you as you exit the arrival hall and shall accompany you to your hotel to ensure a speedy check-in. We recommend arriving into Chennai in the morning so that you can see a little of Chennai in the afternoon.

Chennai (formerly Madras), can be considered a 400-sq-km conglomerate of urban villages and diverse neighbourhoods making up Tamil Nadu's capital will pleasantly surprise you. Its role is as keeper of South Indian artistic, religious and culinary traditions.

With its sweltering southern heat, roaring traffic and lack of outstanding sights, Chennai has often been seen as the dowdier sibling among India's four biggest cities. But it's well worth poking around its museums and temples, savouring deliciously authentic South Indian delicacies or taking a sunset saunter along Marina Beach – the world's second-longest urban beach.

Among Chennai's greatest assets are its people, infectiously enthusiastic about their hometown; they won't hit you with a lot of hustle and hassle. Recent years have thrown in a new layer of cosmopolitan glamour: luxe hotels, sparkling boutiques, quirky cafes, and smart contemporary restaurants – but the best of Chennai remains its old soul.

This afternoon after a sumptuous lunch you begin exploring. Our city expert shall meet you in your hotel lobby where they shall give an overview the city, however, our focus this afternoon will be to discover colonial Madras through the buildings the British left behind. Look closely at each structure and you will find stories of grand ambitions and unexpected revolutions; the hopes, fears, and ideas of the creators, as well as the history of this ever-vibrant city. You should be back at your hotel by 1800.

Overnight will be at ITC Grand Chola on a full board basis



DAY TWO

Your exploration of Chennai continues. We begin the day with a walk we like to call – ‘the Peacock Trail’ - an easy walk through Mylapore exploring fascinating stories hidden away in the mundane rituals of daily life. This walk comes packed with a bundle of stories – stories of local life, of Gods and demons, of ancient customs and symbolisms, and of Mylapore and Madras – some amusing, some baffling, and some that might just help you make sense of the sights around you. And why is it called the Peacock Trail? Well of course, there is a story in there too!

After the walk you have some time at leisure to relax and have lunch, unwind before learning about a very different facet of Chennai. In the year 52 AD a bearded man walked the sands of a beautiful beach in the port town of Mylapore. He spoke of a new God in a new land and left his footprints on the sands of time and therein lies the story of Christianity in India. We let the story unfurl before you; the story of a man who doubted God’s word, of men who changed the cityscape with their distinctive architecture, of a Church without a congregation and of men who brought in the skies of their homeland to prayer halls. We walk you through Chennai’s Christian history and stories, from the humble arrival of St. Thomas, to the British who left behind a cathedral of neo-gothic splendour. There are stories behind everything you see; struggles for power and dominance, profound debates over philosophy, and varying explanations of what it means to be human or to be divine.

Come and discover the rich traditions of Christianity in India. Understand the forces that shaped it and experience a part of Chennai you may never have expected.

Overnight will be at ITC Grand Chola on a full board basis



DAY THREE

Today after breakfast you check out and head just out of Chennai to Taj Fisherman's Cove. The hotel is located on the beach and we have planned to showcase very different facets of this region this morning. About 20km from your hotel is the UNESCO world heritage site of Mahabalipuram.

Mahabalipuram was the major seaport of the ancient Pallava kingdom based at Kanchipuram. Mahabalipuram is famous for its rock carved temples along the Coromandel coast. They were built in the 7th and 8th centuries. It is known especially for its rathas (temples in the form of chariots), mandapas (cave sanctuaries), giant open-air reliefs such as the famous 'Descent of the Ganges', and the temple of Rivage, with thousands of sculptures to the glory of Shiva. Spend the morning exploring these wonderful temples and learning more about them with your city expert.

In case you have planned your visit between the months of January and April: we have a very special experience planned for you this evening – The Olive Ridley Turtle Walk. Initiated by famed wildlife conservationist Romulus Whitaker in 1972, the walks are conducted by conservationists and volunteers between January and April each year, offering an amazing glimpse into nature. Guided groups walk the beach at night, safely relocating the eggs that the migratory Olive Ridley turtles lay. Turtle hatchlings emerge 45 days later and are released into the sea. During the walk, guests are educated on the challenges facing this endangered species, its contribution to the environment and the ongoing conservation efforts being made to preserve this age-old natural phenomenon.

Overnight will be at Taj Fisherman's Cove on a full board basis

DAY FOUR

This morning you continue your journey onwards to Puducherry. Check-out after breakfast, the journey to Puducherry should take about 2 hours and 15 minutes.



The union territory of Puducherry (formerly Pondicherry; generally known as 'Pondy') was under French rule until 1954. Some people here still speak French. Hotels, restaurants and 'lifestyle' shops sell a seductive vision of the French-subcontinental aesthetic, enhanced by Gallic creative types and Indian artists and designers. The internationally famous Sri Aurobindo Ashram and its offshoot just north of town, Auroville, draw large numbers of spiritually minded visitors. Thus, Pondy's vibe: less faded colonial-era ville, more bohemian-chic, New Age meets Old World hangout on the international travel trail.

The older 'French' part of town (where you'll probably spend most of your time) is full of quiet, clean streets, lined with bougainvillea-draped colonial style townhouses numbered in an almost logical manner. Newer Pondy is typically, hectically South Indian.

You should arrive in Puducherry a little before lunchtime. Hidden behind a discreet façade in the heart of the old French town, Villa Shanti is a 15 rooms and suites boutique hotel with a restaurant, a café bar and The Little Big Shop – this will be your home for the next few days.

This evening we have planned a walking exploration of Pondicherry. Pondicherry's colonial past comes alive as we take you through its quaint boulevards and sleepy streets. Quirky twists of history and unforgettable characters are just some of the things you will hear about. A general bravely fighting a battle when the war itself was over. Revolutionaries hiding from the law. Free flowing liquor that glued everything together. All this is a part of Pondicherry's lively past.

You'll explore the architecture and the ironies, the contradictions and the culture, the things Pondicherry did right and many things that didn't work out. Surrounded by the British in India, the French here were gritty, stubborn and refused to disappear. Behind every charming façade, you'll find incredible stories.

Overnight will be at Villa Shanti on a half board basis



DAY FIVE

Puducherry is also known for its beaches, food and deep sea diving. In fact it is one of the only dive sites on the eastern coast of India. The waters in this area are characterized by natural coral reefs, rocky pop-ups, man-made folds and a plethora of marine organisms. The marine life includes corals, lionfish, grouper, kingfish, moray eels, eagle, manta rays, parrot fish, sea snakes, triggerfish, angelfish, bannerfish, and crustaceans. Diving here is done by PADI certified operations. So if you are interested in exploring some marine life off the coast of India do get us to modify the itinerary and add a couple of days dedicated for diving.

We have kept most parts of today at leisure to explore on your own the beach and the neighbourhood or to just unwind. You will have a vehicle at disposal to get to different places.

In the evening we have planned a short food trail to showcase what else Pondicherry is known for. On this trail we'll talk about the people who made Pondicherry such a vibrant city, and we'll taste the foods that tagged along with them when they travelled. As you discover the food that Pondicherry loves, you will uncover forgotten stories and histories of the people who make up this town. For centuries, Pondicherry has been a place of refuge and reinvention and all of this is reflected in its vibrant food.

Overnight will be at Villa Shanti on a half board basis

DAYS SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT AND NINE

This morning after and early breakfast you make your way to your next destination – Thanjavur. The drive to Thanjavur (previously known as Tanjore) takes about 4.5 hours and enroute you can explore one of the great living Chola temples - Airavatesvara Temple. The great living Chola temples are a UNESCO world heritage site which were completed between 11th and 12th century CE. There are three temples that form a part of the world heritage site though such temples were built by Chola rulers all over south India. The temples testify to the brilliant achievements of the Chola in architecture, sculpture, painting and bronze casting. You should arrive at Thanjavur at about 1400.



Thanjavur is one of the ancient cities of India in the Southern State of Tamil Nadu. The prosperous agrarian city was ruled by various dynasties like Cholas (850-1279 AD), Pandyas (1279-1311 AD), Vijayanagaras (1535 AD), Madurai Nayaks, Thanjavur Nayaks, Marathas (1674 AD) and later the British Colonists (1799 AD). Historically, an important centre of art, architecture, culture and spirituality, most of the UNESCO World Heritage Monuments – great Living Chola temples – are located in and around Thanjavur.

Thanjavur rose to prominence as a Chola capital in 850 AD and the finest specimen of Temple architecture, Brihadeeswarar temple stands majestic, built in the first decade of the eleventh century. The Famous Saraswati Mahal Library, housing over 30000 Indian and European manuscripts, the Palace and prominent temples proximal to Thanjavur make it an ideal spot to explore Thiruvaiyaru, Srirangam, Kumbakonam – the region which is the confluence of the arts.

Home of the famous Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam, India's predominant classical dance form, Thanjavur also witnessed the codification of Carnatic Music and the evolution of the famous Cire Perdue or lost wax sculpture technique of Chola Bronzes. Thanjavur offers a rich legacy and the ultimate experience of the fine arts of India.

To showcase the essence of Thanjavur we have selected your home here very carefully – Svatma. The Svatma experience is designed as a voyage to discover the mind. Experience this magical journey by indulging in the luxury of leisure while dabbling with arts in a beautiful home environment. With unique spots to match your every mood, Svatma flaunts a regal personality. Feel the rich fullness and comfort coupled with warm hospitality the native way. SVATMA is about self-surrender to the abundant charms of ancient Tamil Nadu – its arts, architecture, culinary heritage and culture.

Lunch will be at Svatma. After lunch settle in and rest for a while. In the evening you can begin learning about Thanjavur.



During your stay there are many experiences that you can explore based on what interests you such as:

Carnatic Concerts: Enjoy the Carnatic music concert by a small ensemble of musicians. Experience the harmony of melodies from the violin, mridangam and the tambura. Come and participate in the musical discussions & enjoy this unique music experience.

Thanjavur Painting: We will take you to the master crafts men who demonstrate the making of handmade jewellery as well as the Thanjavur style of painting. The painting is made by gilded and gem-set technique – where gold leaves & sparkling stones are used to highlight certain aspects of the painting like ornaments, dresses etc.

Bronze Sculpting: Watch the mesmerizing process of Bronze Sculpting. Thanjavur is the cradle of this ancient art form and the skill has simply transcended generations of sculptors. Watch cire perdue live in action from casting to the sculpture taking its final form.

Vedic Chanting: Listen to Vedic discourses at Svatma. It has the unique ability to calm your mind and purify the soul. The chanting has you experience a divine vibration that resonates in every corner of Svatma. The priest engage our guests by explaining the meaning and purpose of these ancient scriptures.

Bharatanatyam: Bharatanatyam is unique in the self-expression or abhinaya and the pure dance or nrutta these comes together in the finest form of codified classicism in the Thanjavur style. The experience curated will be insightful with some highly interesting & informative lecture demonstrations by proficient dancers at Svatma and help you know more about Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam.



Tour with an Expert: There are academic experts at Svatma to guide you on these subjects, with visits to these ancient monuments. Guests will leave feeling enriched and fulfilled and just a little bit wiser about the fascinating aspect of temple architecture, Tamil history & Temple History.

Culinary Trip: Take a culinary cultural trip to Tamilian cuisine to expand your palate. You are invited to the special guest experience kitchen at Svatma, where you can learn the authentic techniques and recipes. The flavours & textures are sublime, and preparations are simplified by our chefs for guests to learn.

Overnight will be at Svatma on a full board basis

DAY TEN

After an early breakfast this morning you make your way to the next destination – Pollachi. The journey to Pollachi will take 5.5hrs by road. Ensnconced in a coconut grove by the serene countryside of Pollachi, your resort portrays elegance and serenity with its graceful ambiance and opulent amenities. You will be staying at the Coco Lagoon Resort. Arrive at the resort by lunchtime and make some time in the afternoon to rest. Towards late afternoon we recommend an easy going bird walk not too far from the resort.

Sethumadai is a world of lush green coconut farms, shrub jungle, mountains, trails and canals, just adjacent to Anamalai Tiger Reserve – A paradise for bird watching! Flagship Species you can expect to sight: Blue-faced Malkoha, Sirkheer Malkoha, Emerald Dove, Tickell's Blue Fly-catcher, Blue-bearded Bee Eater, Vernal Hanging Parakeet, Brown Fish Owl, Flame Throated Bulbul, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Brown Headed Barbet Winter migrants here are species such as Grey Wagtail, Asian Brown Fly-catcher, Indian Paradise Fly-catcher, Golden Oriole, Blue Throated Blue Flycatcher and Indian Blue Robin to name a few.

Overnight will be at Coco Lagoon on a full board basis

DAY ELEVEN

Today we have planned a day visit to Valparai. This is a combination of a birding, wildlife and a tea tour. Valparai is a hill station in the Anamalai Hills at an elevation of about 4500ft. It is part of the Western Ghats and is largely a tea growing region in southern India. The journey to Valparai is scenic with winding roads of the western ghats. Valparai lies about 2 hours away from Coco Lagoon. Valparai receives among the highest



rainfall in the region during the monsoons (around June). The plantations in the town are surrounded by evergreen forests. The region is an elephant tract and is known to have many leopards. The drive to Valparai from Pollachi passes through the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary noted for Bengal tiger, elephants, boars, lion-tailed macaques, gaur, spotted deer, sambar, and giant squirrels. The area is also rich in birds, including the great hornbill, and hosts seasonal migrant birds such as the grey wagtail. It is the Lion-tailed Macaque that we seek the most on this trip as these unique primates are endemic to this region.

We drive through tea gardens dotted with shade trees where the work force (typically women) dressed in vivid saris skill-fully pluck the rows of bushes, with a deft use of the fingers and thumbs. The walk around the tea estates will also allow you to experience local culture by interacting with the planters.

You will then be driven to a fully operational tea factory to understand the processing of tea. Here, the machinery and different processes involved in producing the finished leaf of both Orthodox and CTC (Crush, Tear and Curl) manufactured tea is explained. We will then visit the tea tasting room where you will learn about the range of flavours of the different grades of tea produced by one of the most exquisite single-estate tea producers.

You will return to Coco Lagoon in the evening.

Overnight will be at Coco Lagoon on a full board basis

DAY TWELVE

This morning we have planned to showcase a very different facet of southern India. We have a 3 hour tour called the Cotton Trail planned for you which is a half day cotton familiarisation trail. Get a behind the scenes look at the value chain of cleaner organic cotton. Visit the workshop where this dying art of weaving is being revived through a farm to fashion model. You return to the resort for lunch.

This afternoon we want to showcase some local arts and crafts. We visit a man who leads a simple yet content life and follows the philosophy of “less is more”. His magical hands work deftly on palm leaves to

create beautiful work of art in a jiffy. Colourful parrots, fishes, flowers and torans which are used as decors for festive occasions and marriages by the zamins of the villages carry his stamp.

You will also be showcased the process of drying, moistening and dyeing the harvested palm leaves which are pre-requisite for crafting these wondrous creations. He sure is one busy man who finds life's pleasure in simple things as making these curios. On this experience we shall also get an insight into palm jaggery making.

Overnight will be at Coco Lagoon on a full board basis



DAY THIRTEEN

From this day forward our focus shifts more towards wilderness found within the Nilgiri hills and the surrounding forests. We check-out early in the morning and make our way to Masinagudi (a journey of about 5 hours). Your home in Masinagudi will be Jungle Hut – a family run property in the situated at the foothills of the picturesque Nilgiri Hills in the hamlet of Bokkapuram, near Masinagudi.

In 1986, after 25 years of working in the tea plantations, Joe and Hermie Mathias chose to settle down in the foothills of the Nilgiris and Jungle Hut was born as a quaint family run homestay in the wilderness. Over the years, Jungle Hut has gently metamorphosed into the cosy resort that it is today under the care of the next generation Mathias' - Anushri and Vikram.

This area constitutes the buffer area of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve which is home to a wealth of wildlife including the Bengal Tiger, Leopard (panther), Asian Elephants, Indian Gaur (Bison), Sloth Bear, Hyena, Wild Boar, Cheetal and many others. Jungle Hut and the surrounding areas are a hot spot for bird life so much so that we are referred to as a bird watchers paradise. They are 20Km from Bandipur Tiger Reserve and 35Km from Ooty.

You should arrive well in time for lunch. Later this afternoon spend the day doing short walks around the property looking for birds with the naturalist.

Overnight will be at Jungle Hut on a full board basis



DAY FOURTEEN

Today the first half of the day you spend bird watching around the Bokkapuram area. Hike to the hills following a perennial stream, amidst mixed evergreen forests and bamboo patches. The habitat is ideal for Woodpeckers, Minivets, Barbets and a number of species of Raptors. There is also a chance of seeing the mammals of the area.

This afternoon after an early lunch transfer by road to Bandipur Tiger Reserve and enjoy a game drive in Bandipur/Mudumalai National Park. Bandipur is a 40 minute drive from the lodge whereas entrance of Mudumalai is about 10 minutes away.

Overnight will be at Jungle Hut on a full board basis

DAY FIFTEEN

Spend the day watching birds in and around Masinagudi. Explore the forested tracts, looking for species like the Sun birds, Flowerpeckers, Nuthatches, Kingfishers, Swallows and Warblers. There is also a little farmland in the surrounding area that is home to Pipits, Larks, Lapwings and Robins. These areas can be explored on foot and can be surprisingly productive.

Overnight will be at Jungle Hut on a full board basis.

DAY SIXTEEN

This morning after an early breakfast check-out and transfer by road to Kabini. The journey to Kabini should take about 3 hours.

Nagarhole National Park, also known as Rajiv Gandhi National Park, is a prominent tiger reserve in south India. The lifeline of Nagarhole as well as Bandipur tiger reserve is the river that divides the parks into two – Kabini. Due to the importance of this water body the park is often referred to as Kabini.

Kabini is known for excellent wildlife sightings of big mammals such as the Bengal tiger, Asiatic elephants, gaur (often called the Indian bison – it is the tallest bovine in the world), dhole (Asiatic wild dog), sloth bear, leopard to name a few. In the last few years, it has gained popularity because of a confident male melanistic leopard that is resident in part of the area open to tourists. The park also has excellent backwaters that can

be explored by boat to get closer to crocodiles, birds and quite often one can find larger mammals by the riverbanks as well.

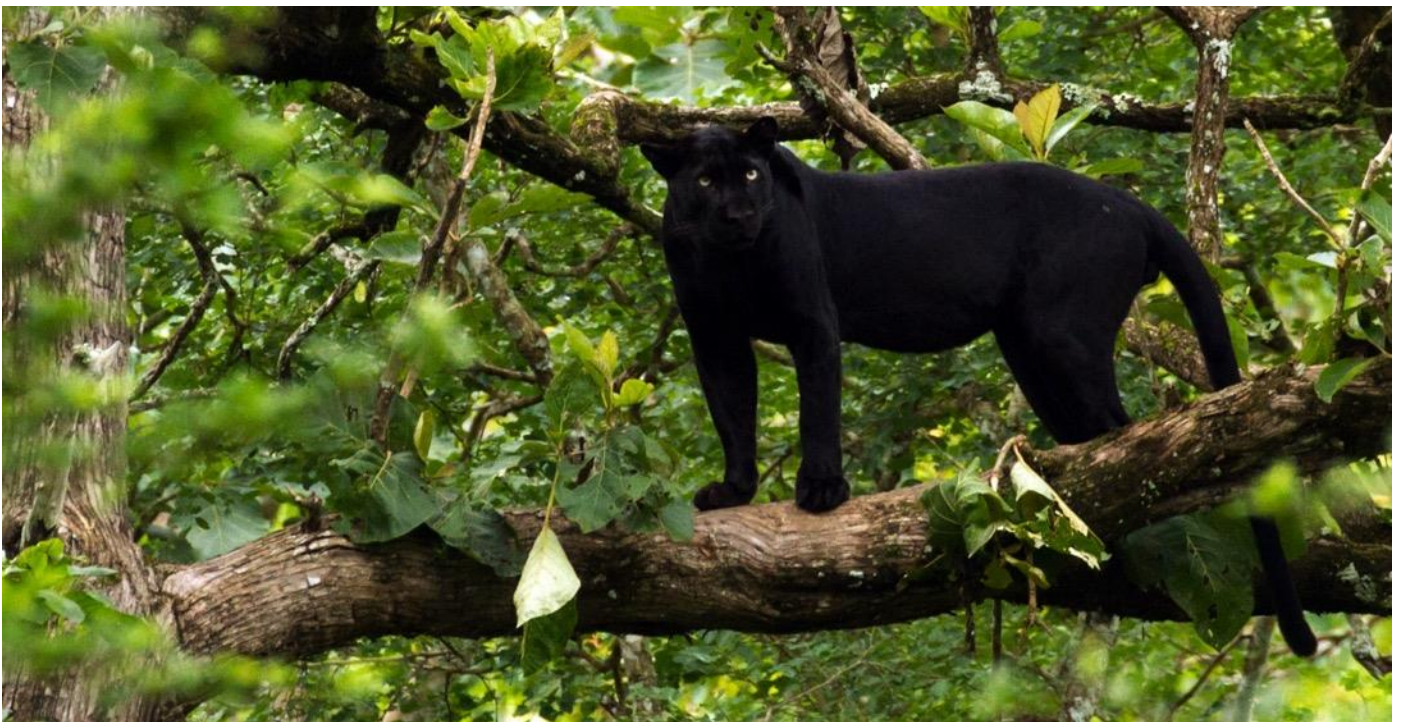
Important note: All safaris in the park are controlled by Jungle Lodges Property, in this case Kabini River Lodge. These use to be the hunting lodges of the erstwhile Maharaja of Mysore. The lodge is government run and all safaris originate here. However, it is important to know that if you are not staying at Kabini River Lodge you do not get jeep safaris instead have to go in larger format buses. Thus, we always recommend staying here. Also, of importance is that fact that there are no exclusive safaris in Kabini.

You should arrive in time for lunch. At about 1500 you begin exploring Kabini. We recommend we change pace and begin with a boat safari that allows you to explore the river and backwaters.

Overnight will be at Kabini River Lodge on a full board basis

DAYS SEVENTEEN AND EIGHTEEN

For the next two days we explore the park in jeeps. There are two safaris planned each day – one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. These will be shared jeep safaris. The park is divided into two zones – Zone A and Zone B. Zone B has access to the river and thus we feel is better for birding. Zone A on the other hand is the region where the black panther is found. Nevertheless, tigers and leopards are found and often seen in both zones and each of them is just as exciting. The zones are allocated alternately so that all may get a chance to explore both sides of the forest.



Recommendation: Kabini River Lodge itself is home to some interesting wildlife species and we strongly recommend you explore the lodge grounds for the same. Some key species to seek here are – Southern Birdwing Butterfly (largest butterfly in India), the Blue Mormon butterfly is the second largest in the country and can also be found here, there is always a troop of Bonnet Macaques that can be interesting to observe and photograph, besides this the grounds are home to Mottled Wood Owl, Jumping Ants, Signature Spiders, Bark Geckos and more. You should not have any trouble keeping yourself busy seeking interesting species to see and photograph.

Overnight will be at Kabini River Lodge on a full board basis

DAY NINETEEN

After the morning safari and breakfast (which is at the lodge each day), check-out and transfer back to Bengaluru. The journey to Bengaluru should take 5 hours. Should you choose you can break journey at

Mysuru for lunch before continuing onwards. We will take a day use room at Taj Bengaluru (which is based at the airport) for you to rest for a few hours before you transfer to the airport and catch your international flight back home.



TRACKS SAFARIS – WE GET YOU CLOSER TO INDIA!

