

On the Road to Kerala

Spice up your clients' plans with a South India sojourn

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The Taj Garden Retreat in Kumarakom

India's size, history and heritage can make it simultaneously compelling and daunting to first-timers. However, you can build immersive itineraries that will appeal to them—and to clients planning a second or third visit—by sharpening the focus on South India.

"When you talk about visiting India, it's a unique experience," says Max Ali, director of sales at SITA World Tours. "India is known for its spirituality; visiting its monuments gives you insight into the culture of the people over the millennia."

No matter where your clients go in India, they'll encounter lots of people speaking various languages and practicing different religions.

"It's not uncommon to see a temple, a mosque and a church on the same street," Ali notes. "Religion gives an aspect of hospitality—visitors are welcomed and people go out of their way to be helpful."

First-timers often think of Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Rajasthan and the Taj Mahal, says Ali, but there are many sites of note in the southern part of India, as well.

Upscale operator Artisans of Leisure

has a number of travelers who include South India on their first visit to the country, says Sonja Stoerr, one of the company's India specialists. Many travelers spend three or more weeks in India and want to see as much as possible, since they sometimes expect they'll make only one visit to India.

Growing Demand

"Some travelers go because they want to learn more about Ayurvedic health practices; others want to experience the cuisine," Stoerr says. "The most popular attraction is Kerala's Backwaters, which is a very different landscape than what is found in the North and in Rajasthan, the most popular tourism destination in India." Other lures include Cochin for travelers interested in Jewish heritage in India and other international influences.

"The majority of our clients who travel to southern India have already been to Rajasthan, drawn by the Taj Mahal and many other UNESCO World Heritage sites," says Pamela Lassers, director of media relations at Abercrombie & Kent. "Southern India is a completely different experience, lush

Continued on page 22



Nature and wildlife surrounds Kerala

Photos courtesy of Taj Hotels (above) and David Gustafson, SITA World Tours (below left)

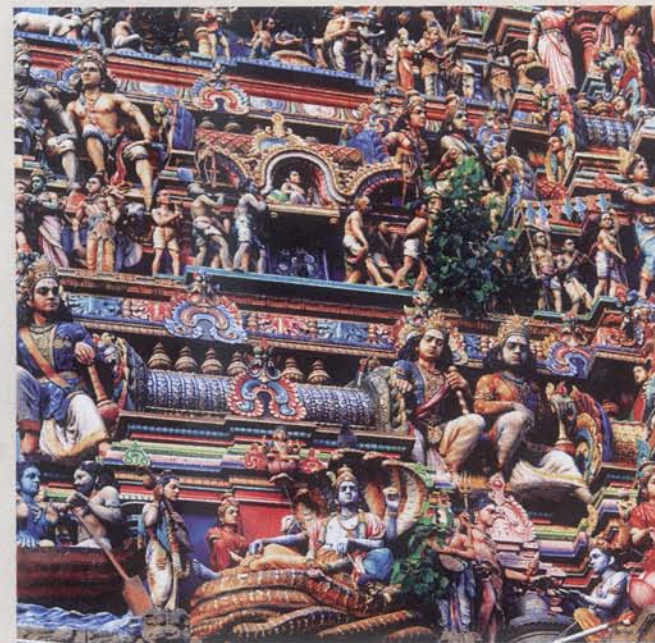


Photo courtesy of Abercrombie & Kent, Inc.

Continued from page 49

Agents may contact Sonja Stoerr, one of the company's India specialists, at 800-214-8144 or ssstoerr@artisansofleisure.com. Commission starts at 10 percent.

When it comes to lodging, Lassers advises that travel agents clearly explain the differences in accommodations in the northern and southern parts of India. "Northern India offers the opulent Oberoi villa properties and the Taj Palace hotels," she notes. "Southern India offers village-style resorts, more casual than those in the north, with a distinctive local heritage and personality."

The Taj Garden Retreat Kumarakom (www.tajhotels.com), on the banks of scenic Lake Vembanad, blends history with beauty. The property, acquired by a missionary family more than a century ago, adjoins a bird sanctuary, which means guests can spot a variety of birds, as well as their nests.

Insider tip: Suggest that your clients book one of the resort's four luxury villas; each provides a private plunge pool. Agents may contact Saibal Sen, general manager, at saibal.sen@tajhotels.com or 91-481-252-5711 or -16.

Kapaleeswara Temple, Chennai