



In the thirty years we have spent working in marginalised communities in Theni District of Tamil Nadu, we have seen many changes. Not only has the social and economic status of India changed enormously, the needs of the communities in which we work have broadened. The global perception of India as one of the world's largest emerging economies masks the reality of millions disenfranchised by poor health, violence and discrimination. We work to make sure their voices do not go unheard.

To this end, we are keen to give visitors some exposure to the type of work we do as an organisation, and the impact it has at the grassroots level. Working in the same district for more than thirty years not only means that we have long standing projects in parts of the country largely forgotten by India's 'development', but also gives us a unique insight into cultures that an ordinary tour package cannot.



Our belief in the potential of communities – whether children subject to discrimination at school, HIV positive people denied treatment, or women suffering from domestic violence – to make positive change in their own lives has been echoed by visitors, consistently impressed both by their resolve to stand up against injustice, and the warmth they have received as guests. When taken alongside our main partner's in-depth knowledge of the region's best sightseeing destinations, we are confident in our capacity to give visitors an experience that lives long in the memory, and hopefully begin a relationship that will make a real difference in the lives of the people they meet.

Why visit South India with VST?

Whilst there are a seemingly endless variety of tour packages coming through south India, few provide an opportunity for guests to really experience the cultures of the places they visit. Though there are some clear 'must-do' sights and sounds in the region, we believe that the best way to give people a trip they will remember is by giving them experiences that they otherwise miss out on. Alongside the beautiful architecture, landscapes, and food which the region has to offer, the colour and diversity of the people is what many people miss when pre-booking package tours that take them on well trodden tourist routes. Our aim is to give our guests an experience that draws on the best of both.

The district in which we operate is well placed between the hustle and bustle of Madurai – perhaps best-known for the World Heritage accredited Sri Meenakshi Temple – and the sylvan hills of Kerala. Our location gives guests an elasticity to tailor their trip as they like – whether this means cramming lots into a short stay, or taking things at a slower pace over a more extended period. Having several vehicles on site –



accompanied by English-speaking drivers and members of staff – means that we can accommodate everything from day trips, to longer stays in the tea-hills of Munnar or the Thekkady wildlife sanctuary – a chance to see elephants, monkeys, and much else in their sub-tropical forest natural habitat.

As an organisation, we believe that giving people the opportunity to see our projects at work – warts and all – is the most effective way to engage supporters, old and new, and give visitors exposure to a side of India that otherwise remains unseen. Seeing project activities first hand gives a valuable insight into the lives of the people we work with, and the difference our supporters make in their lives.



For this reason, we try to give our visitors a realistic experience of grassroots level projects, in order that they see how their support is put to use, and the impact it has. Previous guests have attended group meetings of women's self help groups, visited projects in remote Tribal regions, seen how their contributions are managed by children's groups to fund their activities, and visited our partner Vasandham Society in the hills of Varusanadu to see their sustainable farming methods in practice.

We ensure that at least one English-speaking member of staff accompanies our guests at all times – giving them the opportunity to ask questions, engage with the project activities, and participate as much or as little as they feel comfortable with. Our aim is to accommodate visitors in every way possible by encouraging feedback to improve the overall experience. In this way, we hope to foster relationships that make visitors want to return in years to come, to see communities are making sustainable changes to their own lives.

Practicalities

Having accommodated visitors from across the world for many years, we are not insensitive to the standards expected by guests. While our on-site facilities could not be classed as five-star, we are keen to make any stay with us as comfortable as possible. We work around the needs of our visitors, conscious that a stay in rural Tamil Nadu is not a typical tourist destination. Outlined below are some details which previous visitors have found useful in advance of their booking:

Lodging – each room has a single bed with mosquito net, working power generators to ensure electricity at all times, and en-suite bathrooms with the standard 'bucket & jug' arrangement. Rooms also have filtered water available on tap, and come with both fridges and kettles.



Food – we have kitchen staff on-site to cater for breakfast, lunch and dinner as requested, all of which can be delivered to the individual's room. Any dietary specifics can be accommodated. If guests prefer to cater for themselves, our staff can accompany them to local markets to buy fresh produce, and on-site kitchen facilities can be used.



Travel arrangements – we have several vehicles which can be used as requested by guests. English speaking drivers and staff will accompany guests on any outing, whether short or long stay. Arrangements will be made for visitors to be picked up from, and taken to, airports or railway stations as needed.

Further information

We can tailor your visit to your interests, time available and budget. We anticipate that for most guests your visit to Arogya Agam will be part of a longer stay in India. The cost of staying at Arogya Agam is £30-£40 per night depending on the extent of travel and staff time. This covers all food and accommodation and travel.

You will need to arrange flights yourself. TicketstoIndia.com or Southall Travel are good starting points. Cleartrip.com has domestic Indian flights and railway reservations. We can also arrange tours with local travel agents.

If you want to go...

Email enquiries@villageservicetrust.org.uk or phone 01480 473437 to book dates and finalise arrangements, or chat about the possibilities.