

The Aranmula Boat Race is organised as an offering to Lord Krishna, the chief deity at the Aranmula Sree Parthasarathy Temple. He is also credited for the design of the snake boat.

Chasing Onam

Every year in Kerala, the homecoming of the mythical king, Mahabali becomes a reason for its people to celebrate. There's folk music and dance, street parades, boat races, and a banquet, and everyone is invited.

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My first introduction to Onam is a tale from overseas – a gathering at Trafalgar Square with stage performances, food stalls, foot-thumping folk music, and the coming together of NRI Malayalis and non-Malayalis to celebrate this festival of harvest, far away from their motherland. Years later, I embark on a journey of my own to trace the origins of this festival and chase the celebrations across God's Own Country.





It's 8.00 a.m. when I arrive in Kochi. The streets are unusually empty. I presume commerce is yet to begin. However, well into the afternoon, when the scene remains unaltered, I enquire with my driver. He tells me that Onam is off-season in Kerala. Malayali families prefer to stay home and celebrate with their loved ones. Men dress up in crisp white mundus (lungis) and apply chandanam (sandalwood) on their foreheads. Women exude grace in their cream and gold sarees with jasmine flowers tucked in their hair. Varieties of ghee-drenched sweets are prepared and elaborate rituals are performed for 10 days.

I notice billboards of a smiling man with a handlebar moustache, a

golden crown, and an umbrella. He's everywhere, selling everything from gold to toothpaste. He's the mythical King Mahabali and Onam marks his homecoming to the state.

If legends are to be believed, Mahabali was an asura (demon) king. But he was a compassionate ruler, whose reign was considered the golden period of Kerala. In the heavens, Lord Indra grew concerned about King Mahabali's popularity. Thus, he sent Lord Vishnu in the form of a young monk – Vamana – to banish Mahabali and send him to pataal (hell). Mahabali appealed to the gods to let him return to Kerala once a year to ensure that his people were happy and content. His wish was granted, and thus he visits his

people during Onam each year.

I arrive at my homestay in Fort Kochi, where I am greeted with an elaborate flower arrangement called pookalam at the doorstep. My host tells me it marks the beginning of Onam festivities. The term is native for flower (poo) and artwork (kalam). At the break of dawn, women bathe and perform their prayers before creating these floral decorations to welcome King Mahabali. Several pookalam competitions are organised amongst housing societies, corporate offices, and even shopping malls.

The next morning, I take a cab to visit the temple town of Thrikkakara, 20 km from Kochi. My focal point of interest here is the Vamanamoorthy



Temple (also known as Thrikkakara Temple). Legend has it that Vamana sent King Mahabali to pataal by placing his foot on Mahabali's head. The temple is located at the site where the incident took place.

A special flag hoisting ceremony is organised on Atham, the first day of the festivities at the temple. Celebrations will continue for the next 10 days, but the mainstay is the Pakalpooam procession on the day before Thiru Onam, which is the tenth and the most important day of the festival. The deity of Lord Vamana is carried around the temple complex on an elephant, followed by a parade of some more elephants covered in nettipattam (caparisons on elephants' foreheads). The air is thick with the scent of fresh flowers, incense, and coconut oil.

Each day, the celebration will

culminate with a grand feast called onasadya – a traditional vegetarian meal that includes numerous courses served on a banana leaf. The temple kitchen is an organised chaos and volunteers dish out meals to thousands of devotees at breakneck speed. The meal includes everything from avial (vegetables in coconut gravy) and olan (white pumpkin and red gram stew), to payasam (jaggery-based dessert with thickened milk), Kerala matta rice, upperi (banana chips), and sarkara varatti (jaggery-coated banana chips) and more.

I then move towards Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala. The town is visibly quieter. The general manager at my hotel makes it his mission to help me chase Onam celebrations in Thrissur. He shares with me details of celebrations that would hardly



1. Throughout the 10-day festival, pookalams adorning home and temple entrances are remade with fresh flowers every day. 2. Nettipattams are classified on the basis of embellishments added on them; the gear of the elephant carrying the idol boasts designs of canes around the gold-plated copper balls. 3. The themes of Kummattikali mask dance are inspired from scriptures and stories of the Ramayana, Darika Vadham, Lord Shiva, and Manjan Nayare Pattu. Skirts woven out of grass and colourful wooden masks are quintessential facets of this performance.

Save the date

This year, Onam will be celebrated on September 11. However, rituals will commence on Atham (September 2). There are four important days of Onam – from September 10 (the day before Thiru Onam) to September 13.



ever find a mention on the Internet.

I begin Day 3 with a visit to a suburban neighbourhood to watch the Kummattikali festival. Malayali men are dressed in grass-clad costumes and kummattis (colourful masks) of characters from Hindu scriptures. They take to the streets entertaining the crowds with their antics and collecting alms. The jolly energy in the air is contagious. I join one of their processions and move to the beat of the *chenda melam* (percussion instrument).

Later that evening, I head to a village on the outskirts of Thrissur to watch a snake boat race, another

important symbol of Onam. Villages form their own teams and sign up for a boat race that can win them cash prizes and the coveted title as champions of the district. The host's running commentary on the loudspeaker in Malayalam is incomprehensible, but I'm sucked into the tense atmosphere, craning my neck amongst the sea of people standing by the backwaters to watch the nail-biting race.

I'm told that the oldest and best snake boat races during Onam are organised in Aranmula village on the banks of River Pampa in the Pathanamthitta district.

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1. The cylindrical percussion instrument, *chenda melam* makes an appearance at all traditional celebrations in the state.
2. Fierce competitive spirit and copious amounts of awe fill the air on race day. Men and women step into the waters and put up a spectacle.



1. There is a distinct order of serving the 11–13 items on the *onasadya* leaf. The first to go is salt and it ends with *payasam*.
2. The Pulikali dance revolves around the theme of hunting. Men enact a play of a hunter and the beast.

Pulikali

The Pulikali Co-ordination Committee that organises the annual parade was formed in 2004. A day before the Pulikali dance parade, the costumes are exhibited to locals at a community hall at Swaraj Round in Thrissur.

Palliyodams, Aranmula's unique snake boats, make for a majestic sight as teams move in pairs, skilfully mirroring each other in a spectacular race.

On the fourth and last day of Onam, I head to Swaraj Round in the heart of Thrissur, where the annual Pulikali, or tiger dance parade takes place. The Maharaja of Cochin introduced this folk dance some 200 years ago, as he wanted the celebrations of Onam to reflect a wild fervour. Hundreds of men spend hours painting intricate tiger markings on their bodies. Soon, they will take to the streets, recreating the tiger's prowling movements with

flair. Gigantic decorated floats look surreal. There's a wedding scene being enacted at one corner, while Mowgli and Bageera are having a good time at the other end. Garuda and a 'hulk-styled' Hanuman show up to amuse the crowd. At the end of the parade, the best costume and the grandest float will be rewarded with hefty prizes.

After four days of soaking in the cultural revelry, I reach the end of the Onam trail. I return home a happy traveller, fascinated by King Mahabali's homecoming visit. There's a reason why they call Kerala 'God's own Country'. 📍



GETTING THERE

AirAsia India flies to Kochi from Bengaluru and Mumbai. airasia.com