

04 THE ANDAMANS Experience the coral reefs

Comprising 572 densely-forested tropical islands that historically housed a British naval base and penal colony, the Andamans have recently reinvented themselves as an island paradise for adventurous modern-day marine explorers. With daily flights from Chennai, Kolkata and Delhi to Port Blair, the Andamans and their azure waters lie within easy reach of visitors and transferring between the main tourist islands is convenient and easy. The Andamans can be dived anytime between October and May, although underwater enthusiasts should aim to visit between February and April when the wind dies, weather conditions stabilise and underwater visibility is at its absolute best. The small but stunning coral reef known as Johnny's Gorge and neighbouring Dixon's Pinnacle are, without doubt, the premier dive sites within easy reach of the Havelock tourist hub. A kaleidoscope of swirling batfish, barracuda, trevally, snappers, friendly grouper and docile reef sharks hover around a pristine and beautiful reef competing for divers' attention. Neill Island is separated from neighbouring Havelock by a narrow channel that is reputedly home to rare dugongs (sea cows). These large, endangered marine mammals are the ultimate underwater sighting for divers visiting the Andamans. South Button Island is another very decent dive and snorkel site while distant Campbell Shoals, lying alongside Long Island and the Blue Planet Resort, boasts sensational and seldom-visited dive sites.

—Stephen Cunliffe

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

05 KUMBAKONAM

Get blessed by an elephant

Kumbakonam, 90 km east of Tiruchirapalli in central Tamil Nadu comes about as a back-in-time pilgrimage, overseen by mighty custodians of Hinduism asserting their grandiloquence with impressive *gopurams*. It is here, wrestling and pushing your way through is a certain chance of coming face to face with Mangalam, the temple elephant, 'trunking' about her business. The *mahout* appeals the pious souls to receive a blessed consent, an *ashirwaadam*, from the very representation of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed obstacle remover. An anticipated currency emerges, is placed in the lip of the pachyderm's trunk, and swiftly passed onto the expectant *mahout*. The jangle of tiny brass bells garlanding her massive collar rents the incense-perfumed air as the pilgrim is gently thumped on the head as a bestowed token. Even today, it is deemed incomplete to enter a shrine without being blessed by the beast, be it at Thanjavur's big temple or Madurai's fish-eyed Meenakshi. So loyally entrenched is this animal, that at Srirangam, the temple elephant wakes up the supine Vishnu to His earthly dominion with shrilled booms of trumpeting.

—Kumar Mangwani



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