

# an **INDIA** apart



Diving off the Lakshadweeps



Andaman island beach



## Stephen Fisher finds a part of India far removed from usual expectations of the country.

Among the many reasons to visit India you might include history, culture and stunning wildlife, but serene beaches on tropical islands might not spring immediately to mind. Surprisingly though, India possesses two beautiful archipelagos that rival the white sandy beaches and dazzling marine life of the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.

Situated to the east and west of the mainland, respectively, are my two favourite beach destinations in the world; the Lakshadweeps and the Andaman Islands. Being a beach lover and a scuba-diving instructor, I would say both offer everything you would expect from an island hideaway including unrivalled scuba-diving and snorkelling, relaxation and breathtaking scenery. Travel to either island group involves a flight and a one or two hour boat trip, but because the archipelagos are not visited as often as other beach destinations, they are all the more beautiful and secluded for it.

To reach the Lakshadweeps you would take a short flight from Cochin to Agatti and then transfer to Bangaram Island by boat, while to reach the Andamans you would fly from either Calcutta or Chennai to the capital Port Blair and take a two-hour ferry ride to Havelock Island. Due to the fact that these islands are relatively remote and still developing, each archipelago has only one hotel worthy of recommendation. The Lakshadweeps and the Andamans are protected by the Department of Environment and Forests and because of this, visitors need a permit to visit them. This can be irksome if sought while in India but is a simple process prior to travelling and something we can arrange for you prior to travelling. Both of these destinations follow the usual seasons of India and the best time to visit is between October and April, though temperatures will be around 30 degrees Celsius all year round.

The Lakshadweep Islands consist of 36 islands, of which only 25 are inhabited, and are situated in the Arabian Sea just to the west of the Kerala coast. The charm of the Lakshadweep Islands is their remote, pristine splendour, none more beautiful than the Bangaram Island. This coral-surrounded haven boasts white, sandy beaches that reach out to inviting clear turquoise water. What makes it so special is the silence, unbroken but for the cry of a seabird or the sound of the waves.

The Andaman Islands are situated to the east of India, and keep to Indian time, although they are actually closer to Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). This means it gets light at four in the morning

and it's dark by 5pm, but due to the relaxed attitude and friendliness of the people you will find yourself falling immediately in line with this. The archipelago consists of 572 emerald islands and islets and spreads over 800 kilometres from north to south. Some of the islands are home to indigenous tribes and are off-limits to visitors.

The island I would recommend is Havelock Island, just a short ferry ride from the capital, Port Blair. The small and intimate Barefoot Island Resort offers air-conditioned cottages and sits in the middle of the jungle along a two-mile stretch of secluded white sand, so beautiful that it was named the best beach in the world in 2005 by The Times. Once you arrive at Havelock Island you will instantly be met by groups of friendly coconut sellers who offer a most refreshing drink after your ferry ride. It's then a 20-minute jeep ride through dense jungle, and then out of the forest appear the most luscious sapphire waters and pristine beach.

Both of these islands are a perfect extension to a cultural tour of India or as a destination in their own right; an ideal tonic for the rigours of the 21st-century. The accommodation, although simple, is always clean and comfortable and offers everything you need for a relaxing and serene beach escape.

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## FACT FILE

The Lakshadweep Islands can be easily added to a tour of Kerala. A two week trip starts from £3,000 per person including return flights. Alternatively, a two week trip combining either the southern state of Tamil Nadu or Calcutta and the eastern region, followed by a few days in the Andaman Islands starts from £3,500 per person. For further details please contact our India specialists on 01993 838 330.

