

Varkala Insider's Guide

Street Stories

1. Introduction	2
2. Raff & Hayley	
GG Tailors	3
Velliyazhchakavu Toddy Shop	4
Palm Tree Heritage	5
3. Rakhul	
Dwaraka	6
4. Ram	
The Juice Shop	7
Ponmudi Hill Station	8
5. Amith	
Om Luna Azul Cafe	9
6. Anu	
Villa Maya, Trivandrum	10
7. Jithu	
River Temple	11
8. Sujith	
Janardhanaswamy Temple	12
9. Praveen	
Edava	13
10. Akhil	
Ustad Hotel & Afzal Hotel	14
11. Ed & Sofie	
Fort Cochin	15
Alcohol Shop	16
12. Adam & Rach	
Jengo's	17
Kollam-ish	18
Egg Puff	18
Papanasam Beach	19
Benny's	20
13. Tara	
All the Sweets	21

1. Introduction

This is Soul & Surf's take on a local area guide. A real insider's guide to our Varkala.

We don't want or need to add to the noise and give you another Lonely Planet-style tourist guide. You can look that up anywhere. This guide won't necessarily tell you about the best, flashiest restaurants, or where to go to get the best sunset (although those things are obviously brilliant and you should do those things too).

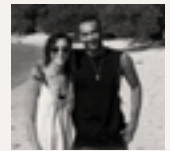
This is straight from the mouths of the people that actually live here, work here, have spent a lot of time here. It's where the staff run away to when they have a day off, or when we finish up for the season and give ourselves a little treat. Where the local kids go to eat the best dosas. Where we spend our time when we are in these places. Most of this stuff is close to home – the everyday that we take for granted in these special corners of the world.

And it's the little gems we've found and assimilated over the years that are away from the tourists, off the beaten path. These special spots sometimes won't have the best decor, wifi or the best service (or any service at all). You may not be able to find them easily, the people that work there may not speak English to you, you might get lost, you might get something completely different to what you ordered. But you'll

be experiencing something real. And that's why we all travel, right?

So here is our version of the Lonely Planet for you. Anecdotes, tips and a peek into a life less ordinary.

2. Raff & Hayley



Raff is Soul & Surf Kerala's boss, who now splits his time between Varkala and Sri Lanka. He is also the boss of the Sri Lanka hotel, phew. Busy guy. He is married to Hayley and they have a dog called Kumi, who stayed in Varkala to look after the place. Hayley is an amazing yoga sprite who taught for five years in Kerala before moving to Lanka with Raff.

Raff

GG Tailors

A lot of people ask me where I get my shirts from. Well, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Love a shirt or a dress? Want another one tailor-made for a fraction of the price you would spend on Saville Row? GG's your man.

I like to give them a sample and then pick a fabric I like to get something made up for myself. Shorts and shirts are his speciality. You can find them at the Black Beach end of Varkala's North Cliff.



Velliyazhchakavu Toddy Shop

Literally translates to ‘Friday Temple Toddy Shop’ – honestly this is one of my favourite places to recommend and something that is so off the beaten track that it took me about three years of living in Varkala to discover it.

And I only found out about it because my friend’s uncle’s brother-in-law in some tiny village outside of Trivandrum accidentally let the secret out. I love taking the whole India team here for the occasional treat of spicy Keralan curries that you probably won’t see on menus in regular restaurants.

The jungle fowl and duck roast curries are my favourite. Also, you can’t not mention the eponymous Kerala Toddy when you talk about these hidden places. Locally brewed, fresh coconut wine that is tapped fresh in the morning and left to ferment for a few hours in an earthen pot. I’ve heard the toddy tapper has to climb up the tree and tap the bark exactly 108 times to get the best toddy. Not for the faint of heart but for some reason (I wonder why) it always seems to put a smile on my face... I usually can’t count to 108 after an afternoon at the toddy shop.



“I usually
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shop.”

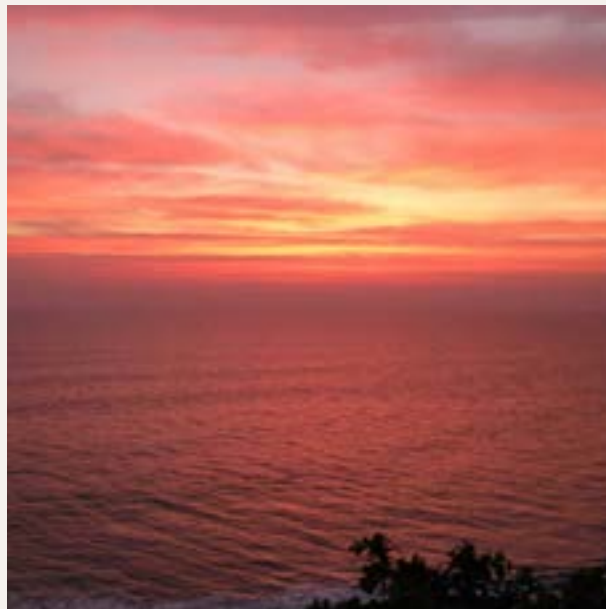
Hayley

Palm Tree Heritage, Odayam Beach

I'll only tell you about this spot if you promise not to tell anyone else, okay?

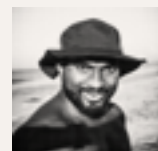
I lived in Varkala for nearly 5 years and this place became my little holiday nook once a week if I could wangle it that much. Hardly anyone knows about this tiny little beach as it's between two of the more popular beaches in the area, so nobody really goes there. Which to my delight often felt like it was my own slice of paradise.

There are a couple of hotels set up there but Palm Tree Heritage is my favourite. I'd recommend going early afternoon, having some lunch and swinging in a hammock until sunset with a good book – and boy, does sunset deliver!



"Which to my
delight often
felt like it was
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of paradise."

3. Rakhul



Rakhul started working in the kitchen cafe at Soul & Surf, and it soon became apparent that we really, really needed him to be customer-facing. If you are ever lucky enough to meet Rakhul, ask him if he will do an impression of you.

Dwaraka

A Malayali cannot live without beef fry. Wherever I go, the first thing I always check: where I can get that traditional South Indian combo – (nadan) parotta and beef fry.

So I found this restaurant with help from some other parotta lovers – it's Dwarka Restaurant, towards Mission Hospital in Varkala town. It still makes me laugh - when I went there, first time ever, I took my seat waiting for someone who can take my order. Suddenly someone comes over, looks at me and shouts at me, "Parotta and beef fry!" (He could even see from my eyes why I was there.)

I've known these dishes for more than 25 years I reckon, but I'm always excited everytime when I go in the restaurant. If you're in Varkala I can highly recommend beef pieces, cooked in fresh ground spices and sauteed with onions, chillies and coconut. I'm sure you won't be disappointed with this awesome combo – parotta beef fry!

HOTEL DWARAKA		
TEA	8	CHICKEN MASALA 120
COFFEE	15	CHICKEN MASALA (FULL) 700
MILK	20	CHICKEN ROST 120
APPAM	8	CHICKEN ROST (FULL) 700
DOSA	8	BUTTER CHICKEN 100
IDLY	8	BUTTER CHICKEN (FULL) 850
IRIYAPPAM	8	CHILLY CHICKEN 120
POROTTA	8	CHILLY CHICKEN (FULL) 700
CHAPPATHI	8	GINGER CHICKEN 150
KADALA CURRY	20	GINGER CHICKEN (FULL) 800
MIXED CURRY	20	GARLIC CHICKEN 150
TOMATO FRY	40	GARLIC CHICKEN (FULL) 800
CHILLY GOLI	80	CHICKEN FRY 120
GOPIMANDURIAN	60	CHICKEN FRY (FULL) 700
MEALS	60	CHICKEN BIRIYANI 110
MUTTON BIRIYANI	200	BEEF BIRIYANI 80
EGG ROST	25	BEEF CURRY 60
FISH CURRY	30	BEEF ROST 70
VELA CURRY	80	BEEF FRY 60
NAMKEEN CURRY	100	BEEF MASALA 70
PROWNS CURRY	150	BEEF CHILLY 70
CHICKEN CURRY (L.P)	100	GINGER BEEF 90
CHICKEN CURRY (FULL)	600	CHICKEN 65 150

"He could even see from my eyes why I was there."

4. Ram



Ram has worked with us since he was a young boy and made his way up from waiting tables to being the manager of our cafe. He's got the biggest smile you'll see and it gets even bigger when he's riding his motorcycle around Varkala.

The juice place near the railway station in Varkala town

Whenever I need a break I go to this juice place. The reason for that is because the juice maker presents his juices so well, and the bang for the buck is usually good here.



"The juice place near the railway station in Varkala town"

Ponmudi Hill Station

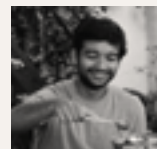
I also like riding my bike very much. Sometimes when I feel like it I make my way to Ponmudi which is a hill station nearby.

Once I was stopped by a forest ranger because there was a herd of wild elephants up ahead (although I wasn't lucky enough to see any of them). When I go there I usually like to also visit Meenmutty, which is a waterfall.



"The ride is of course really beautiful, but we also see many different kind of birds and animal species."

5. Amith



Amith's family is from Kerala but he's lived his whole life in Bombay, until he left it behind to come work at Soul & Surf. Probably one of the nicest people in the world. Of course we would say that. The one thing you will never forget after you've met him is his infectious laughter.

Om Luna Azul Cafe

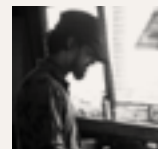
It's a house that's converted into a restaurant and is run by this lovely couple. The lady always has a smile on her face and is uniquely from both Mumbai and Varkala. Their appams in the morning are my favourite.

Just sitting there with a glass of chai makes you feel like you were right at home. Their food is exquisite and it's my favourite restaurant in Varkala.



"Just sitting there with a glass of chai makes you feel like you were right at home."

6. Anu



Anu has always been the man in the kitchen for Soul & Surf and has worked alongside Sofie and our guest chefs to come up with the Soul Food menu. He's grown so much over the years as a chef and now it makes us really proud that he hosts his own special culinary pop-up events for a lucky few diners on a regular basis.

Villa Maya, Trivandrum

Being a chef myself I've always appreciated when I come across new ideas. For me one of the best meals you can get in the South of Kerala is at Villa Maya.

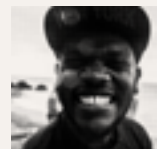
Their grilled Yellowfin Tuna and stuffed crab in a shell are some examples of their creativity on show. And you've got to try the Meen Kodambuli which is a crowd favourite.

The ambience there is pretty great too. It's an old building which is kept really well, and from the outside it looks like a castle. The sounds of traditional music playing through the speakers nicely dovetails against the soothing sounds of flowing water that you hear around the restaurant.

I was buzzing once I came out as I had all of this energy in me to go back and start experimenting with food for my own satisfaction.



7. Jithu



One of the three Varkala OGs aka The Boys, Jithu started hanging out at Soul & Surf after our Sunday kids surf club. He took to surfing so quickly and loved it so much that we mutually knew he should join the team as soon as he graduated from university. With that warm welcoming smile and those ridiculously good skills in the water, he definitely embodies our idea of what surfing should be... fun.

River Temple

I very much like surfing at the local point break (Edava) – although nothing quite matches the experience of surfing with a couple of friends at this river mouth. Plush with marine life, the beauty that surrounds you is magnificent. This was the place where I caught my first right hander barrel and one of my first instructors Adam was right in front of me when I did. It was a sick experience.

Adam and Rachel are instructors from the UK who taught me and my two brothers how to surf, and they would once in a while take us to this spot to surf with us and it was one of the best feelings. One such time when we were all surfing together, the sunset was just so good that we all were left in awe. I wait for the spot to start working every year.



8. Sujith



The second of the Varkala OGs aka The Boys, Sujith (lovingly called The Indian Justin Bieber) also joined us after university and came through the Sunday Surf Club that we run for the local kids. Today along with his cousins Praveen and Jithu he is very much involved with helping the sport reach more and more kids around Varkala.

Janardhanaswamy Temple

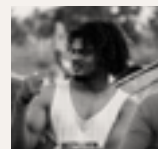
My earliest memory of going to the temple was at the age of eight. I have been going there regularly ever since. I would spend hours inside talking to whoever was inside and to pray. I can feel the amazing power that the temple has on me.

Apart from surfing, I have grown up spending my days at this temple. No matter what situation I am in, the Janardhanaswamy temple makes me feel better about it.



"No matter what situation I am in, the Janardhana—swamy temple makes me feel better about it."

9. Praveen



The third and definitely not the least of the Varkala OGs aka The Boys, Praveen like Sujith and Jithu came to us through the Sunday Surf Club too. He's the first and only longboarder in Varkala and we love that!

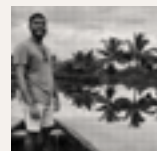
Edava

I like the ride to Edava. It's a really nice feeling to ride there early in the mornings. I usually like to go to the spot at dawn and watch the sun rising. It never fails to amaze me and it's beautiful because it calms you. I will sometimes go there late and not get into the line up without having a glass of chai first.

Once the surfers start coming in it's great to have a chat with some of the guys I get along with. Communication is such a great aspect of being able to surf with others. It's the best because everyone is happy and keen to have a laugh.



10. Akhil



Akhil used to be a web developer and coder in his previous life but couldn't resist life by the beach in Varkala. Originally hailing from Kovalam he travelled and lived all around Kerala and the world until he decided to join us as a cafe manager before becoming our hotel manager. We love his attitude and ability to get even the hardest things done with a smile on his face. Ask him and he'll say, "It's all part of the managing thingie". If you want to be his best friend, take him out for a prawn fry or a biryani.

Ustad Hotel & Afzal Hotel

These restaurants are my favourite restaurant in my hometown, 10 minutes drive from my home. It's literally next to the Vizhinjam coast. Whenever I'm at home I always have dinner at one of these places.

In Ustad, I always love to have mussels fry and prawn fry – those are my favourite dishes over there. In Afzal, they are famous for the really spicy chicken fry and a tiny parotta. Once or twice a month I go over there to have that spicy chicken fry and parotta.



11. Ed & Sofie



Are Soul & Surf's founders who found themselves in Varkala in 2009 and thought... I wonder if we could open a little surf & yoga stay here? They now divide their time between home-town Brighton and a mix of India, Sri Lanka & Portugal.

A two-day, one night city break to Fort Cochin

Over the years of living in Varkala Sofie and I needed a break, now and again, from our quiet rural area and craved a bit of city sophistication. For many years Cochin was the only place within striking distance we could find a decent glass of wine and a fancy meal.

We'd get the 6.00 am commuter train which got us to Ernakulum by 9am, then get a rickshaw across to the old fort and be ready to go. We'd drop our bags at our hotel and then head down to Jew Town (that's it's name, honest) and get involved in the antiques and spice warehouses. Speak to Sunny at Crafters Antiques, tell him we sent you, and he'll unlock the hidden warehouses full of amazing antiquities from all over India.

We tend to stay at Spencer Home which is a really reasonable guest house a few doors down from Malabar House, and a tenth of the price. We'd go to The Old Lighthouse Bristow Hotel for sunset drinks overlooking the beach and watch the locals watching sunset. Once the sun is down we'd head for dinner at Malabar



House and opt for the degustation menu in the courtyard watching incredible Indian classical music performances. We'd either go back to Malabar House for their delicious egg & bacon dosa, or to Kasi Art Cafe.

Then we'll go to a couple of the art galleries, before popping down to Crafters to pick up all the stuff we'd reserved, then get a taxi across to Ernakulum to get the late afternoon train back to Varkala. At Soul & Surf most of the fabrics, all of the antiques, even some of the light fittings and taps come from Kochi.

Now you know.

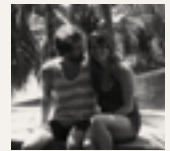
Buying alcohol from the government shop in town

There only used to be one booze shop in the whole of Varkala town. It's still there, on the right side of the road before you get to the golden-man roundabout. Tucked between respectable looking shoe shops it's down a filthy, dark alleyway seething with small drunk Keralan men.

You all queue and wrestle and jostle together to see who can wave their rupees the most urgently at the servers, who understandably separate themselves from the chaos with metal grilles. It's like buying crack-cocaine in Tottenham... apart from the small drunk Keralan men.



12. Adam & Rachel



Adam & Rach joined us back in 2013, back when Soul & Surf was still in black & white. From humble beginnings baking cakes and working as surf coaches they've scaled the heady Soul & Surf heights.

Adam

Jengo's

I like to drive down to Jengo's and see the change in scenery and buildings – I like the houses here, they look really different from the ones in Varkala and Edava. It is around 30/45 mins away by scooter. It's a beautiful drive. That's also where Dennis lives.

Who is Dennis?

Dennis is a man who used to run dolphin tours from Main Beach and I used to buy resin from him to fix surfboards at Soul & Surf. And he lived in the village next to Anjengos (Anchuthengu). It was also fun to look at the surf down there, pre-jetty (rest in peace, Jengo's waves). You can also go to the old dutch fort (Anjengo's Fort) which is nice to walk around. Once we went spearfishing down here with Jasper (a surf coach who worked with us at the time) and he caught all the fish for our dinner. Rachel was too scared to use the speargun at the fish, and I had terrible aim.



Kollam-ish

We used to like going out on the scooter. If we had a day off and there was no surf, or we were a bit surfed out, it was nice to jump on the scooter, take a drive out of Varkala and head north towards Kollam. The closer to Kollam you get, the road gets really interesting – you’ve got the ocean on the left, backwaters and paddy fields on the right and a mostly very quiet drive. Really nice to see a part of Kerala that is so close to home, but is away from the tourist spots of North Cliff. DO put sunscreen on your upper thighs because its very easy to burn them when you’re out on the scooter.



Egg Puff

I used to like going to Cake Park in Varkala town (next door to Dwarka) to get curried egg puffs. Sometimes I would buy two with the intention of bringing one back for Rach, but most of the time I would eat them both before I got back. Don’t tell her.



Rachel

Papanasam Beach – ‘Destroyer of Sins’

Once upon a time, Soul & Surf had a surf school separate from the hotel, underneath Marine Palace on Papanasam Beach. This beach is in between South Cliff (where Soul & Surf is) and Main Beach, and often gets missed out as people rush through to get to North Cliff. If you wander down just before sunset you will see the pūjā ceremonies, with offerings made to the sea. It is a deeply spiritual place, with ashes collected from the cremation grounds immersed in the sea here – the belief being that the sins of the deceased will be washed away, with the ritual providing the soul with moksha or eternal salvation.

I used to assist Adam on surf lessons down here, back in the day, and we got to know the locals on this little stretch of beach. We also got to hang out with Praveen, Sujith and Jithu, and would sneak little surfs or body surfs in with them when we could. It has its own little community, and we spent a lot of time eating, swimming and sharing chai with the beach boys and shop owners.

I remember a very random afternoon - I was hiding from the sun after a surf lesson, and mooching around a little clothing and bric a brac store on the



“The sins of the deceased will be washed away, with the ritual providing the soul with moksha or eternal salvation.”

corner, sifting through a box of fabrics. After quietly watching me for a few minutes, the owner of the store offered me a chai and sweets, some reiki and for my fortune to be told. I spent more than two hours in that little store, and made a friend who I always pop in and see when I return to Varkala. Also check out the two jewellery shops on the road up to the temple. Adam bought my engagement ring from Latif's shop (the one on the right), and we always pop in to say hi, have chai with him, and gawp at all the lovely silver.

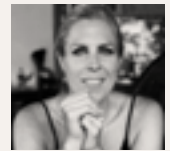
Benny's

Also hidden in between South & North Cliff, Benny's is on a little stretch of road that runs behind Janardhanaswamy Temple. The cafe is not actually called Benny's (IDK what it's actually called, but everyone calls it Benny's). Benny (also not his real name) is a diamond, a lovely, kind man who makes the best iced coffee IN THE WORLD. He will not tell you his secret ingredient, but he is always smiling and always up for a chat. He also sells toiletries, incense, natural soaps, and owns a little bookshop next door.



I used to wander down here in the mornings after breakfast, take a book to read and order an iced coffee. I would never get to read the book, because I'd while away hours chatting to Benny or the other regulars.

12. Tara



Tara has been an integral part of our team for quite some time. She has stepped into diverse roles for us as head of vibes one year and our main yoga teacher since she first came to India to join in the cafe. She also has learned Malayalam quicker than everyone else on the team (apart from our Malayalis).

All the Sweets

I am a homebody. Let's face it, I'd rather lounge in the "known" than venture too far away, especially when the known is just so lush. That said, I will always step out for sweets, and I happen to adore Keralan sweets.

So I feel qualified, as a result of my dedication to and regularity in the Varkala sweets circuit, to provide a few delectable insights. First of all, Keralan sweets are very different from the Northern Indian sweets we typically associate with the Indian sweet tooth.



It should come as no surprise that, in the rice belt of India, almost all the traditional Keralan sweets are rice-based, and often pair with coconut jaggery, and ground coconut. However, despite how incredibly delicious Keralan sweets are, they're becoming harder to find in the modern Keralan bakery culture. And, as one soon learns, they are only available at specific timings.

So here's the scoop:

Place: Kithoos Bakery

Location: Varkala Town (opposite police station)

Order: Kozhukatta [steamed sweet coconut rice dumpling (gluten free)]

Timing: Before 12pm(ish)

Place: Café HBR

Location: Varkala Beach Rd (at Hindustan Beach Resort)

Order: Elayappam [banana leaf wrapped steamed sweet rice & banana dumpling (gluten-free)]

Timing: Between 3pm-5pm(ish)

Place: Chai Shop

Location: Ubiquitous

Order: Uniappam [deep fried coconut rice, jaggery & banana ball (gluten-free)] and/or

Pazham Pori [battered & deep fried banana (contains gluten)] and/or

Pazham Unda [deep fried banana cake ball (contains gluten)]

Timing: Between 3pm-5pm(ish)

"I will always step out for sweets, and I happen to adore Keralan sweets."