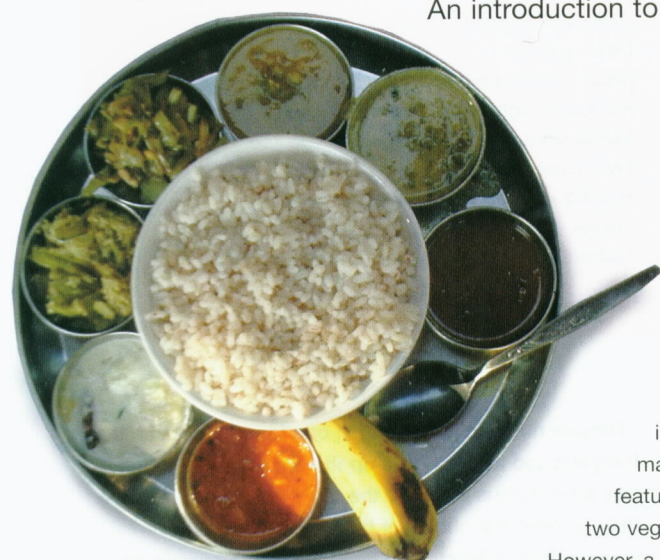


# Indian

## eat in or take away?

By Scooby Gill

An introduction to just some of the delights of vegetarian and vegan Indian food



All lovers of Indian food will agree that eating curries can become an addiction. You might have hated them when you were a kid, or indeed like me, they may not have even featured in your 'meat and two veg' upbringing.

However, a transition to

vegetarianism/veganism brings with it

an unavoidable investigation into the many spices and exotic blends of flavours involved in the art of curry making. When you get it right, curries are deliciously addictive and at times intoxicating. So where else should you go to 'feed your habit' and 'get your hits' but India itself, the home of curry and where the food is so intoxicatingly wonderful that not a drop of alcohol need cross your lips the whole time you are there.

My trip took me to Kerala, on the south west coast of India. It's a land of palm-fringed, white-sanded beaches, dense tropical forests, paddy fields, mango and cashew nut plantations and a few dusty, hot towns and cities thrown in just to give the traveller the full Indian experience. It was a long way to go for an Indian take-away but in the true spirit of journalistic research, I suffered that journey in order to provide you with the full story on what you are missing out on! In all seriousness, this is one take-away that you won't get down the high street.

Indian food has always been known as the leading vegetarian world cuisine and Southern India, in particular, is seen as a vegetarian stronghold. Many of the restaurants advertise themselves as vegetarian. You can be easily excused for being lulled into a false sense of security but be warned, just under many of the restaurant signs you will also no doubt see the words 'and non-veg' appearing. A glance at the restaurant menu will also bring disappointment as you read through a variety of fish and meat dishes amongst the options. But don't be too

disheartened, as your image of India as a completely veggie paradise dissolves in front of you there are two main things to remember. Firstly note the price of the 'non-veg' items - they are so much more expensive - and also note that they are not as plentiful as the huge array of veggie options available. For the most part, the 'non-veg' options are a product of the tourist industry, and despite their presence on the menu, rest assured that vegetarian food is still 'King' in Southern India.

Most people's experience of Indian food is limited to the Indian take-aways or restaurants in this country. The menus quite often include a written explanation to each dish, giving what ingredients are included and even an indication to the spiciness of the dish. In India not only are there a good many more interesting dishes to choose from but quite often no further clues are included as to what to expect from the dish. Indeed, even with a little knowledge of Indian cuisine, you will no doubt still find plenty on the menu that you have never even heard of.



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## The A-Z of Indian Cooking

*Alu (Aloo)* - potato

*Alu Podimas* - dry, fried coconut, onion and potato

*Aviyal* - mild coconut curry with pumpkin, bean, mixed veg and green banana

*Bagon* - green aubergine (more of a northern dish)

*Battoora* - thick puri (deep fried bread)

*Bindi* - okra

*Bringal (Brinjal)* - aubergine

*Capsicum* - pepper

*Channa (Chenna)* - chickpeas

*Chat* - sour vinegary tomato and onion sauce

*Coftha* - vegetable 'ball' in sauce

*Dal (Dhal)* - bean/pulse (usually lentils) in curry/sauce

*Dal Fry* - as above with onion and not spicy at all

*Dal Maharani* - green dal (with green chilli)

*Dal Thadka* - spicy dal with a little chilli

*Do-Piazza* - with onion

*Geera (Jeera)* - cumin seeds

*Gobi* - cauliflower

*Jal Frizee* - spicy tomato curry

*Karela* - bitter gourd

*Khajoor* - dates

*Khaju* - cashew nuts

*Masala* - spicy sauce/flavouring

*Moongfali* - peanut

*Mutter* - green peas

*Palak* - spinach

*Piaj* - onion

*Rajma* - kidney beans

*Sabnam* - mushroom

*Salna* - green peas

*Sag* - spinach

*Thorán* - dry, fried cabbage, coconut and beetroot

*Vegans watch out for -*

*Curds* - milk curds

*Dahiwalá* - yoghurt

*Dehi* - yoghurt

*Ghee* - clarified butter

*Kitchadi* - yoghurt and cooked cucumber

*Korma (khuruma)* - creamy curry

*Lassi (Lessy)* - milky drink

*Pachadi* - yoghurt and raw cucumber

*Paneer* - cheese

*Raitha* - salad containing milk or yoghurt

So to prevent the 'twenty-questions' scenario between yourself and the waiter should you be tempted to sample such delights in their native environment, here is an idea of what to look forward to, be wary of or steer away from. You may even find it useful for those trips to the Indian take-away down the road.

The basics are really very easy. Once you get to know the words for the various ingredients (as listed on the A-Z on India Food in this article), you can read through most menus and understand what you would be eating. For instance, Alu is potato and palak is spinach so Alu Palak is potato and spinach curry. The only complication is

when regional variations use different words and spellings for various ingredients like Aloo for potato and Sag for spinach (Sag Aloo is the same thing as Alu palak!). Before going to India I had got to know most of the basic words from my partner during our numerous trips to take aways. However, I did discover many more in India that I hadn't heard of before

such as Khaju (cashews), Mutter (green peas) and Rajma (kidney beans).

Keralan food is guaranteed to use fresh, seasonal ingredients and unsurprisingly the coconut heavily features in many of the dishes. It is a staple in the Keralan diet and the whole of the coconut is used in many different ways including rope making. You will no doubt be familiar with pakoras, samosas, bhajis, poppaddams and chapatis. All of the things you would expect to feature on a menu in the UK will be familiar items on the menu in a restaurant in Kerala. But what about idly, dosas, idiyappams and vadai? Investigation of such items generally began at breakfast time.

Despite not being really much of a fan of breakfast, the food was too tasty to pass up the opportunity. For the less adventurous amongst the tourists (and non-vegans) there is often the choice of the more traditional continental breakfasts and eggs to order. However, as long as you don't have a problem with curry-orientated dishes for breakfast, the choice for veggies and vegans is very good. A particular favorite was idiyappam with kadala. Idiyappam are little balls of rice noodles and are a perfect accompaniment to the kadala, which is a mildly spicy chickpea curry. Iddiyappam are like a rounder version of the string hoppas that you can get in Sri Lanka.

Masala dosas are another tasty breakfast alternative, although they are available at any time of the day in the tourist areas. These are thick rice pancakes with a mild potato curry wrapped inside. They are normally served with two small portions of varying curries and a portion of coconut chutney. Before going to India I had only had one masala dosa. This was served during a special vegan night at the excellent vegetarian Indian restaurant in Plymouth called Veggie Perrins. This had certainly 'wet' my appetite for them and it was such a pleasure to be able to have them everyday if I had wanted to!

Rava iddy also features on the traditional Keralian breakfast menu. Again served with a variety of small portions of curries, rava idly are palm size rice pancakes and come in portions of 3 or 4. Other traditional breakfast choices included paper roasts (like masala dosas but thinner and with no filling), poori masala or puri masala (deep fried flat bread served with curries) and upma or uppama (a bowl shaped serving of mixed veg and coarse semolina).

As with all meals, there is always an excellent choice of beverages on offer. The fresh juices are hard to beat at

**Eating customs -**  
It is customary to eat only with your right hand.  
Use your left hand to pick up your glass of water.  
Knives and forks are always provided at restaurants if you prefer.





Above: Jicky's rooms  
Right: Oottupura vegetarian restaurant



Rs 15 to Rs 30 (25p to 45p) and you can choose between many tempting flavours such as papaya, pineapple, orange, grape, mango and coconut depending on the season. In India, it is no surprise to discover that the tea is rather good. For vegans though, since you are unlikely

to find any soya milk, the choice is limited to black teas. I took some powdered soya milk mixture with me that had been brought back from the USA with the intention of using it for tea. However, I didn't need it, as the black teas on offer were delicious enough to not require the use of my milk substitute. Particular favorites were cardamom tea, ginger tea (large pot Rs 35 - 50p), Jal Geera (a blend of tea, cumin and other spices that we couldn't translate) and Kashmiri tea (green tea with cinnamon, cardamom and saffron). Vegans beware of the lassi (sometimes spelt lessy), as this is a milky/yogurt milkshake type drink and therefore one to be avoided.

It was quite difficult to make it to lunchtime without being tempted by a snack or two. Pakoras, samosas and bhajis are the most familiar. However less familiar but extremely tasty alternatives are idlis or idlys (steamed rice and semolina cakes) and vadai (deep fried dal and veg cakes). The latter resembled ring doughnuts and both idlis and vadai are small finger sized snacks generally served in portions of three or four accompanied by a small serving of coconut chutney and sambar (a thick curry). The idlis are quite tame in taste but the vadai can sometimes have a kick (usually indicated by the speckling

of green chilli seen better once they are broken open).

The sambar also has a tendency to sneak up on you in terms of spiciness and you may find yourself reaching swiftly for the coconut chutney to bring things to a cooler status. Be warned also that the sambar is occasionally made with buttermilk so for vegans it may be worth checking first.

Lunch isn't far around the corner and this is when the choice of delights explodes leaving you with a feeling of indecision about what exactly you could manage and what you will be have to wait to savour the next day. The favourite choice of most of the locals is a thali (sometimes spelt tali). The word 'thali' actually translates as 'meal' and starting at about Rs 20 (about 30p) it is a real bargain, particularly as it is kept 'topped up' by an ever vigilant waiter or chef. Thali consists of a variety of curry dishes such as sambars (thick curries), rasams (thinner soup like curries), thayirs (chutneys or pickles), with a serving of rice and topped off with a pappadam. It often finishes with a banana. The whole ensemble is served on a flat stainless steel dish (called a thali) on which are placed small metal bowls (katoris) containing the various dishes. Sometimes it is served on a sliced banana leaf, which makes for a colourful palette of food! In a restaurant that serves non-veg options always make sure you ask for the veg option and even in a vegetarian restaurant there are a few things that are worth checking out if you are vegan. My partner was tucking in at a beachside café in Kovalam only to be told by the waiter that the dal included 'a special recipe' which contained curds. Dal is usually completely vegan so we hadn't thought to ask.

We were lucky to find *Oottupura Vegetarian Restaurant*



Krishna



in Varkala. Although you are guaranteed to be bombarded with options at the majority of restaurants in India, it is always nice to find a particularly helpful, understanding, and welcoming establishment. We based ourselves here to 'intensify our research' of India cuisine! The restaurant also provides excellent accommodation at a very reasonable price. We had walked the entire length of the cliff top of Varkala and finally returned to Jicky's Rooms finding it to be the most comfortable and cleanest. The guest house is set back in a peaceful position amongst the palms just behind the restaurant which was very convenient for the short waddle 'home' after a large dinner!

Oottupura, I was told by one of the waiters, refers to a king who had opened up his hall 100 years ago to provide food for many of his people free of charge. Obviously the restaurant doesn't provide food free of charge but the prices are extremely reasonable. It was started six years ago and is open for most of the year apart from sometimes during the June/July monsoon season. It is owned by Oscar Anand and the chef, AAF Luthy, cooks up a variety of Indian, Chinese and continental dishes to offer the hungry vegan with a choice that it is impossible to tire of. On the 'frontline' are waiters Satheesh, Akash and Krishna who were always ever welcoming and understanding of our dietary needs. They never tired of our many questions regarding the different items on the menu and were always happy to offer variations and vegan alternatives.

We mostly concentrated our attention on the Indian food but saw many people tucking into the less traditional alternatives such as Chinese noodles, spaghetti, macaroni dishes and even chips. We worked our way through the curries during our stay! Particular favourites were the traditional Kerala dishes of Thoran and Aviyal.

Despite the vast volume of food we consumed, we somehow always managed room for a touch of dessert. Dessert is the area that leaves vegans a little disadvantaged in India as many contain milk products. However, Oottupura served up lovely banana or pineapple fritters (vegans, ask for no honey on top). In Kovalam we even found a restaurant that served a lovely coconut rice pudding and in Trivandrum we discovered the delights of Kesai (a sweet version of iddlys). Of course there is also the amazing array of fresh tropical fruit on offer such as papaya, jack fruit, pineapple, mango, red bananas and, as ever, coconuts.

If you are looking for a sweet snack and one that is often sold on street stalls or supermarkets alike, then laddus (or ladoos) are the answer. These are small sweet balls about the size of small apricots made from gram flour, sugar, oil, and cardamom and often containing cashews and sultanas. Ladoos cost no more than about Rs 10 for 6 and they are very sweet and really quite filling. We asked Luthy, the chef at Ootupura if he knew how to make them. It turns out that the recipe is a closely guarded secret and therefore he was unable to get an exact recipe. However, he experimented and came up with his own tasty version, which he was happy to share

with us. It was touching that he had gone to such trouble and provided us with not only the recipe but also a sample of his work, which we enjoyed for dessert that evening.

It would be impossible to be exhaustive when describing the food that is on offer in India for the travelling veggie or vegan. There is so much variety and so many different regional variations and names for the ingredients. However, I hope this brief introduction will help both at home during those trips to the take away or Indian restaurant down the road, or for a longer haul to the sunny and spicy shores of India itself.

#### Varkala

Approximately 40 km north of Trivandrum (Triruvananthapuram) Beach is 2km from main town but perched below huge red cliffs on top of which is ample accommodation and restaurants. A slightly quieter alternative to the better-known resorts such as Goa and Kovalam.



#### Suggested restaurant and accommodation

Oottupura Vegetarian Restaurant and Jicky's Rooms at Cliff, Helipad, Varkala, Kerala, Southern India. Email - jickys2002@yahoo.co.in Kovalam Approximately 10km south of Trivandrum.

Two sandy beaches with many restaurants and hotels along the back of the beach and also amongst the palms and myriad of pathways behind. Larger and more commercial resort than Varkala.

#### Suggested restaurant

Lonely Planet Vegetarian Restaurant set back from the beach. Very well known for its cuisine and also offers cooking courses.

#### Suggested accommodation

small family run guesthouse run by S. HariKumar. Contact at Thiruvonam, near Devi Temple, Avaduthra, Kovalam P.O., Trivandrum, South India - Pin No. 695527

#### Price Guide

Rs 70 = £1.00 approx

Rooms in small guesthouses - Rs 250 per double room per night

Large pot of ginger tea - Rs 35

Fruit juice - Rs 30

Masala Dosa - Rs 20

Thali meal - Rs 20 - 40

Large evening meal for two - Rs 400