

## Of Forests and Wild Beasts

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Athirappilly falls in Kerala is one of the biggest tourist attractions in south India. But if you are someone who likes the journey more than the destination, this area has something for you. With thick green vegetation and blessed weather, the drive from Athirappilly to Valparai through the Sholayar Reserve Forest is a stunner.

Athirappilly lies about 25 km from Chalakkudy in Trissur district. One can take an early morning ride from Trissur or Kochi and deviate to Athirappilly road from Chalakkudy to get the best of it. Drive through this stringy stretch with rubber plantations and amusement parks and about 40 minutes later, you will see the magnificent falls up ahead. Standing 80 feet high, it is the highest fall in Kerala and will tease any traveller in its path to stop and click some pictures of this rainbow-dwelling wonder. Avoid weekends when the falls have quite a crowd come in from as far as Karnataka.

Photo Credit: Shutterstock.com



Athirappilly falls is also known as the Niagara of Kerala

For some, the trip ends here, and for some, it's just beginning. Stop at the falls and have a good breakfast from one of the scattered local eateries here, as the forest road on the way up have absolutely no shops on it. Enjoy a proper Kerala-style breakfast, stock up on bottles of water, and get back on the road.

Drive for about 5 to 7 km from Athirappilly to Vazhachal which has a small waterfall. The forest checkpost here is the entry point to the Sholayar Reserve Forest. Beginning here is a 44 km stretch of single-lane road through the Sholayar forest, that ends at Malakkapara checkpost on the other side. All travellers must submit their details at the checkpost. However, there is no

entry charge here. If you are carrying any plastic materials, they will be marked here to deter littering inside the forest.

Once you enter, travellers are allotted a certain time period to cross the checkpoint at Malakkapara. This is to give them a minimum amount of time to stop inside the protected area. The breach of any of these two rules will land you a fine of Rs 2,000.

Say goodbye to mobile phone networks and drive on further on the smooth zig-zagging roads which are part of the southern ghats. The trail through the Sholayar rainforest with occasional features of green meadows, dense green forest trees, bamboos is peppered by sounds of wild animals and birds. The road remains cold throughout the year and the occasional drizzle is fairly common. Casually walking elephants among other beasts are some of the exciting sights on the journey.



Lakes and islands free of habitation offer great views here

The route has multiple viewpoints and you can pull over and spend a few minutes at a couple of them, looking down at the water flowing from the Sholayar reservoir and if you are lucky, spotting elephants taking a bath in the waters.

You must keep your senses active as wild animals like gaurs and deer crossing roads is common. You will spot Malakkappara village once you cross the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. Drive on past the checkpoint at Tamil Nadu, and the surreal silence of the forest engulfs you. Stop here for a snack with a view.

You can also halt at the Sholayar Dam and Urulikkal estate as well.

Drive further up between the tea plantations and villages that smell of cardamom to reach Valparai located 3,500 ft above sea level. Note that the place often witnesses thunderstorms. The obscure yet tranquil hill station in the Anamalai Hills is the biggest attraction here. Its alluring combination of clean air and picturesque sights is bound to entice any traveller.



Valparai comes alive on its slopes of tea plantations

The town has multiple eateries, if you are looking for a meal The restaurants serve authentic Tamil dishes and the local tea stalls offer light snacks. One can have a good lunch here and get back on the road, and roll out to probably the last of the day's stops.

Drive further up a couple of kilometres through the Vlaparai-Pollachi road. A mighty descent starts here. With 40 hairpins on the way down, with a view of the Aliyar dam and reservoir on the right, Valparai to Pollachi is a treat for any driver. One can choose to enjoy the view of this picturesque descent from the first hairpin and head back to Athirappilly, or take on the route and end up at Pollachi. Taking this longer way back means driving down with troops of monkeys, hornbills, the endangered lion-tailed macaque, and the most exciting Nilgiri tahrs, endemic to the region. Visit during the monsoons to soak in the best of these misty mountains.

Source: <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/70778/drive-from-athirappilly-to-valparai-through-sholayar-reserve-forest>