

## **Before arriving at Sabarimala temple in Kerala, devotees visit a mosque**

The procession of devotees making its way up a climb on the main road at Erumeli, a small town in Kerala, is distinctly Hindu. The crowd comprises mostly of boys and men, all of whom are clad in either black or brown mundus, a wrap-around worn in south India. The devotees are bare-chested, wear beaded chains and have smeared vibhuti, or the ash made from burnt dried wood, across their foreheads and on the forearms. They chant the name of Lord Ayyappa, the deity at the hill temple they will eventually reach at the end of their journey, in a sing-song manner.

To get there, many of these devotees would have to undertake an arduous hike through the woods, which begin at Erumeli. All through the journey, every devotee carries a bundle on his head that is loaded with ghee-filled coconuts that are to be offered at the Sabarimala temple. The Ayyappa pilgrimage is not open to females, except for children and the elderly. The devotees arrive from all over India to pay an annual visit to the Ayyappa temple.

### **The Uphill Quest**

Every year, before they set out for the annual pilgrimage, the devotees take to abstinence of all sorts — in their diet and in their conjugal life, for instance, for 41 days. A majority of the devotees have been coming to the temple every year for most of their lives.

[Erumeli](#) is situated about 60 kilometres away from the [Sabarimala Ayyappa temple](#) and is a must-visit destination in the context of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The reason behind the

stopover is rather unusual as ET Magazine found out. As the crowd of chanting devotees trudge up a climb on the main road of the town, the domes of a large structure appear in the background. As normally as they would enter a temple, the crowd of barefooted devotees enter the Vavar mosque. They circulate around the mosque and chant the names of Ayyappa as well as Vavar, a Muslim saint who is also referred to as Vavarswami by the Hindu devotees.

A visit to the [Vavar mosque](#) is an integral part of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Ravi Menon has been working the Middle East for most of his life. The 52-year-old entrepreneur has now returned to Kerala for good. The bespectacled soft-spoken man lets on that he has been visiting the [Sabarimala temple](#) since he was a child. "We make it a point to visit the Vavar mosque as well. All this is part of the tradition. It is required. It sends out the message to all people that 'we are one'," he says.

The Ayyappa devotees visit the mosque throughout the 160-odd days of the year when the Sabarimala temple is open to devotees. Even when the Muslims offer their prayers inside the mosque, the Hindu devotees perambulate the mosque. "We know that the tradition of Ayyappa devotees visiting this mosque goes back to over 500 years," says PA Irshad, president of the Mahalla Muslim Jama-ath, which takes care of the administration of the mosque.

CU Abdul Karim, secretary of the Jamaath, says that the mosque remained open to Hindu devotees even when several riots raged across the country. "Even on the day when the Babri Masjid was demolished, there was a huge crowd of Hindu devotees here. The Muslim devotees also offered their prayers as usual on that day," remembers Irshad.

According to the Jamaath representatives, a large number of families in the district, including Muslims, also accommodate devotees if they want a place to rest during their journey to the hill temple. The accommodativeness of the town has translated into a huge number of pilgrims landing at Erumeli year after year. This has translated into opportunities for the local people as the demand for services in Erumeli in terms of restaurants, pharmacies and shops selling trinkets associated with the pilgrimage and other memorabilia also grew year after year.

### **Under One Roof**

"For the last 40 years, my family has been hosting Ayyappa devotees at our home. Even when we are offering prayers inside the mosque, the devotees chant and perambulate the mosque. We do not interrupt them in any manner and nor do they disturb us," says Karim. Every year, the mosque also organises a festival called Chandanakudam to celebrate the connect with the Sabarimala pilgrimage. During the festival, representatives of the mosque as well as the temple administration get together during the proceedings which begin at around 7 pm. The festivities start with a procession led by ceremonially decorated elephants. First the procession heads to the mosque and later they move to the two Hindu temples nearby.

"There have been occasions when fringe groups among both religions tried to make a case for breaking the tradition of interfaith harmony that the mosque stands for. But a majority of people disagreed with the views of the hardliners," says Abdul Karim.

Interestingly, the Vavar mosque has decided to do away with processions during the birthday celebrations of Prophet Mohammed known as Nabi Dinam in Malayalam for the next three years. "We decided not to have processions during the Nabi Dinam because during these three years, the Muslim festival happens during the Sabarimala season and they have a procession every day," explains Irshad. The decision has met with some resistance among the hardliners within the community but the Jama-ath plans to stick by its plans.

Manoharan, a Sabarimala pilgrim who has visited the mosque almost every year for the last 20-odd years, says that he would not feel satisfied reaching the summit at the Sabarimala unless he had visited the Vavar mosque. "This is a celebration of friendship. This is good for all of us. I don't know if it would be possible to have perpetuate such traditions. But such traditions would do the whole society a lot of good."