

THE DO'D AND DON'TS OF THE IRUMUDI YATRA

FROM MALAYSIA TO SABARI MALAI, INDIA

After a strict discipline and fasting for over one mandalam with daily Annadhana Poojas and other austerities, the Swamies are now mentally, spiritually and physically ready for the Irumudi Yatra to Sabari Malai.

However, there are many things the Swamies must do right and also some things the Swamies must avoid in order to achieving a satisfactory Yatra.

The following guidelines are prepared with the sole aim of getting the swamies, especially the Kanni Swamies, more aware of what to do and what to expect in the yatra.

SWAMIYE SARANAM AYYAPPA

CHECKLIST OF ITEMS TO BE INCLUDED IN YOUR LUGGAGE:

- 1) A schoolbag type of bag that can be carried on your shoulders and back allowing both your hands free for other activities.
- 2) Long sleeve sweater / tracksuit to keep warm. (optional)
- 3) Long stockings, like the type footballer's use, to keep your feet warm during night.
- 4) Torch light of medium size, preferably with hands straps.

- 5) Bathing soap-liquid will be practical and Dettol brand, with it's anti-bacteria quality will be a good choice.
- 6) Clothes washing soap (bar or liquid)
- 7) Hair shampoo / conditioner (optional)
- 8) Bath towel-choose a quick drying type, dark in color.
- 9) Water Tupperware with a shoulder strap-useful during nada yatra (optional)
- 10) Shorts-Choose a quick drying type, dark in color. Useful for petta tullal and bathing in the rivers. (optional)
- 11) Tissue roll / packet & Wet tissue (optional)
- 12) Disposable under wear (optional)
- 13) Personal medication
- 14) Personal clothing
- 15) Waist pouch-PVC- useful for keeping cash etc
- 16) Toothbrush / tooth paste
- 17) 2 100 plus and 2 Mineral Water
- 18) Light food items-biscuits/etc (optional)

ITEM PROHIBITED

- 1)FOOTWEAR (OF ANY KIND)**
- 2)CIGARETTES**
- 3)BEER/ LIQUOR**
- 4)DRUGS**
- 5)LEATHER ARTICLES (JACKETS/CAPS/ETC)**
- 6)ANYTHING THAT DISTURBS YOUR CONSCIENCE**
- 7)ANYTHING THAT IS A PUBLIC NUISANCE**

Departure Day Activity At your home

Getting ready with your bags packed, you can do your prayers in your usual manner and it will be good if you could do the full Pooja including the padi pattu and the 108 Sarana Goshams. After prayers, your family can do a Patha Pooja and get your blessing. Upon finishing it, place your entire luggage into the car that is going to fetch you to the airport. Make sure your passport and plane tickets are taken (if you have not given it to the Gurusamy)

Take a coconut that has been cleaned, wash in turmeric water and place 3 kumkumam pottus on it. Take it to your alter, light 3 pieces of camphor on the coconut, show it three times around our beloved Ayyappan's picture, walk backwards till you pass the entrance door of your house and come outside your entrance gate and shatter the coconut on the ground, chanting Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa. It will be good to have somebody to guide you, as you walk backwards. Immediately get into your car and proceed without turning back.

Do not say farewell to anybody, as this is a Yatra and not a holiday. In case you have forgotten something at home, wait somewhere outside your home and ask somebody to fetch the item for you.

Dress-code

Your Yatra clothing while leaving your home for the airport will be black / blue veshti and a matching shirt or t-shirt and bare-footed. It will be useful to keep your sweater in your hand luggage that you will be carrying into the aircraft.

VERY IMPORTANT

YOU MUST BE IN THE AIRPORT THREE (3) HOURS BEFORE THE FLIGHT TIME.

IN THE AIRPORT

- 1) Wait together with the other Swamis for the Guruswamies arrival, in case they are not there. Keep your passport and tickets available all the time. The Guruswamies will arrange for the check-in of the tickets and baggage.
- 2) Make sure you do not carry more than Malaysian Ringgit- One Thousand-RM 1000.00 and other currencies not more than the equivalent of Malaysian Ringgit Ten Thousand-RM 10,000.00 per person. This is a Government Regulation. Defaulters will be penalized.
- 3) Do not purchase cigarettes or liquor at the Duty Free shop.
- 4) Do not accept strangers request to carry their baggage for them. If in doubt, refer to our Guruswamies. Swamies who have done so in the past have got into trouble.
- 5) Swamies carrying cameras are encouraged to buy your film in Malaysia as it is cheaper and better quality.
- 6) Last but not least, behave yourselves and the project the right image of an Ayyappan devotee.

ON BOARDS THE AIRCRAFT

- 1)Keep your hand luggage on the rack provided above your head and remember to take them when you are disembarking.
- 2)There will be small pillow and blanket on your seat. Keep it with you for later use because it may become too cold for comfort.
- 3)Malaysian passengers will be required to fill a disembarkation form. Fill it up and keep it in your passport. Help other swamies who need help in filling the forms.
- 4)Upon arrival at Chennai Airport, do not rush to disembark. Let the crowd clear first. Always stick to your group. Follow the immigration queue and use the green lane for customs clearance.
- 5)For Swamies who have checked in their baggage, do not forget to collect them before customs clearance.

PROGRAMME IN INDIA

Upon getting out of Chennai airport, a bus will be waiting for us. Make sure all the Swamies co-operate and load all the baggage into the bus. In case the bus is delayed, please wait patiently and keep your eyes on the baggage. Before getting down from the bus, please wait for instructions from your Guruswamies.

NIGHT HALT

- 1)Accommodation will be provided in temple or mandabam. In case there is a need to stay overnight in a hotel, Swamies will have to take your baggage along with you to your hotel rooms.

- 2)Swamies are reminded that they cannot use the dirty mattresses, bed-sheets, blankets, and towels etc that are provided by hotel. It is advisable that you move the mattresses into a corner, spread your veshties on the floor or bed and sleep.
- 3)In the mornings, a small prayer will be at the Guruswamies room. Please be early for the prayer. After that will be breakfast and as usual wait for the Guruswamies to say the Sarana Goshams.

TEMPLE VISIT

Whenever we stop for a temple visit, Swamies will be notified the time to be back at the bus. Please co-operate and be punctual. If one person is late, the entire schedule will be affected.

THE IRUMUDI KATTU CEREMONY

The Guruswamies will verify the correct and auspicious time to commence the Irumudi kattu Ceremony and notify the Swamies. The Swamies will be provided with a blanket each to use when carrying the Irumudi on their heads. The same blanket can be used by the swamies to keep them warm at night. As identification, swamies are encouraged to mark their blankets to avoid any confusion. Swamies are encouraged to fast on the Irumudi kattu day until their Irumudi is tied. After that they can go and eat . The Irumudi Kattu Ceremony will start with a Kanni Swami and end with the Guruswami. All Swamies must chant the Sarana Goshams loudly on a continuous and consistent basis until

the last Irumudi ie tied. Swamies must take turns to lead in the chanting. You will also be required to chant the Sarana Goshams loudly along your Nada Yatra in order that our beloved Swami Ayyappa will be with us along the way. As a familiarization exercise, Kanni Swamies and other junior Swamies should chant the Sarana Goshams at home during your poojas.

Swamies must keep loose change of 10 rupees to be used for Guru Dakshina and Kannika for Lord Ayyappa to be put into the Irumudi (front compartment) It is customary and traditional for the swamies to put a flower garland for the Guruswamy while his Irumudi is being prepared.

THE IRUMUDI

The Irumudi is basically a cloth bag with two compartments. The front compartment and the rear compartment. The front compartment will contain the ghee filled coconut (to be broken and the ghee used for abhishegam of our Swami Ayyappan upon reaching the Sannidhanam) and other prayer items also to be used only at the Sannidhanam. The front compartment will also contain some cash that is a Kanikka for Swami Ayyappan. The rear compartment will also be loaded with rice and other personal items. In the olden days, the rear compartment will be loaded with everything the Swamies will need along the way, as there were no shops or any other choice if you forget something. Today, there are temporary shops sets up for the pilgrims' convenience.

STRICTLY IMPORTANT!!!

- 1)The Irumudi is our only passport to climb up the holy 18 steps. without Irumudi, you will not be allowed to go up the holy 18 steps.
- 2)The Irumudi contains the Auspicious Ghee Filled Coconut that you going to carry on your head all the way till the Sannidhanam.
- 3)The Irumudi deserves all the respect, devotion and love that you have for our bagawan, Swami Ayyappan.
- 4)The placing of the Irumudi onto a Swami's head, as well as removing of the Irumudi from a Swamies head is to be done only by gurusami and when the gurusami is not around then a senior Swami who has been to Sabari Malai for at least 3 years, can do the placing of the Irumudi onto a Swami's head, as well as removing of the Irumudi from a Swamies head.
- 5)While walking, the Irumudi must be on the head all the time, with the compartment containing the ghee filled coconut in the front.
- 6)Swamies who want to ease themselves should inform a senior swami who will then halt and remove the Irumudi from your head before you can ease yourself. Incase you have missed your group; find any Guruswamie or senior swamie to help you.
- 7)While walking, you can use your tundu to tie the Irumudi to your chin. Under any circumstances, the Irumudi should not fall off your head.
- 8)With your Irumudi on your head, you should not fall at anyone's feet. Not even your Guruswamies feet.
- 9)Every time the Irumudi is lifted off your head and placed elsewhere, you have to 'thottu kumbida vendum'

(touch & pray), as the Irumudi is equivalent to Lord Ayyappa.

- 10) While in the bus, the Irumudies will be kept on the rack above your head.
- 11) Bags will only be allowed if there is additional space, failing which bags have to be placed at the leg space.

-Follow your Guruswamies instructions without questions.

THE IRUMUDI YATRA

The Irumudi Yatra commences from the designated Mandapam. Once the Irumudi is placed on your head, you circumambulate Bagawan's image and walk backwards till you reach the entrance where you have to break a coconut and then proceed to Maha Ganapathy's shrine which you also circumambulate till you are facing him, when you have to break a coconut and then walk backwards till you reach the entrance. Here you turn around and walk into the bus without turning back. Seating in the bus will be according to the positions the Swamies occupied earlier.

There will be short halts for temple visits and food. There may also be overnight stops. You will be informed on a case-by-case basis on what to do. The next main destination is Erumeli.

ERUMELI

Upon arriving ERUMELI, the Swamies must remove all their belongings that they require for the pathayatra from the bus.

NOTE:

Carry the minimum load that you have to because you are going to carry it for many miles. Don't expect other swamies to carry your unnecessary load for you. Think and plan carefully.

The bus that drops the Swamies at Erumeli will wait for the swamies at Pamba and you can only see the bus in about 4 days. Erumeli is a small town thriving on trading activities patronized by the Swamies. Erumeli is the starting point of the pathaYatra. The Guruswamies will arrange camp for the overnight halt at Erumeli.

PETTA THULLAL

After getting settled in the campsite, swamies must get ready for the Petta Thullal. One or two palamalai swamies must volunteer to stay in the campsite and look after the Swamies belongings. The rest of the Swamies must change themselves into the right gear for the Petta Thullal, which is actually comparable to wild and active roadside dancing celebrating victory. The ideal attire will be shorts or your veshties tied up to knee length, and swamies should take along your soap, shampoo, washing soap and towel for bathing.

The Guruswamies will arrange for the required color powders, knives and arrows. The swamies stand in a row and the Guruswamies and senior swamies will smear

various colored powder on your body and face. The Kanni swamies will each carry an arrow and other swamies will carry various other things and the group will walk to the Karuppuswami's Temple where a tavil and nathaswaram team will be arranged to provide music for the swamies to dance. The whole group will dance and sing "**SWAMI THINTHAKA THOM THOM- AYYAPPA THINTHAKA THOM THOM**" on a continuous basis along till they reach Vavar Swami's Mosque, which they circumulate and then dance along to the Dharma Sastha temple. The Petta Thullal is to get rid of whatever balance of ego that is left behind in the Swamies before the Yatra. At this stage, the Swamies should only think of our beloved Swami Ayyappa and surrendering to the magical mantra "**SWAMIYE SARANAM AYAPPA**". The Swamies should turn deaf and blind to all the negative words and sight around. The Swamies are now sweating and dripping colored sweat and some swamies are not even recognizable. Straight they head for the Manikandan River to bathe and wash off all the colors.

Back to your camp and a small prayer, followed by food and then it's time to rest and get ready to wake up 2 am the next morning for your Nada Yatra.

The Nada Yatra

The next morning will see the Swamies washing their faces and brushing their teeth with rationed, bottled water, bags on their backs and waiting for their Irumudies. The Guruswamies will place the Irumudies one by one onto the Swamies heads and it's time for instruction on who will lead, who will follow and so forth. **SWAMIYE SARANAM**

AYYAPPA and the swamies are on their way to see their beloved Swamy Ayyappa who is waiting to shower his blessings. The Swamies will be divided into a smaller group to walk under various leaders, and there will also be stops for drinks, food and rest. There will be identification flags for swamies to recognize and know that our group swamies are in the location. The magical word for the rest of the day is WALK AND WALK AND WALK and if you are tired and worn out it means you are in need of chanting more of Sarana Goshams. We will walk for one and the half hour and rest for half hour.

“SWAMIYE SARANAM AYYAPPA” says the Guruswamies in a full throated sound and lead the Swamies out of Erumeli. Swamies must be very careful to keep up with the group, as Erumeli will be very crowded in the midst of other Swamies doing their Petta Thullal.

After sometimes distance, the swamies will find the crowd thinning as well as getting darker. Time to use your torchlights now. Keep walking and you will be passing through Peoor Thodu. It is a river about 4 km from Erumeli. Lord Ayyappa is said to have rested here during his expedition for the tigress milk. The surrounding is all forest. After Peoor Thodu are IRUMBOONI KARA, ARASAMUDI KOTTA and KAALAKETI. There is a shrine here where some swamies light camphor and break coconuts. The legend says that Lord Siva stood here and witnessed Manikandan’s fight with Mahishi. After Kallaketi is Azhutha River, where the **Kanni Swamies especially must pick a pebble and keep safely for future use at Kallidum Kundru.**

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A short distance away is Azhutha Malai and it's time now for climbing uphill. At the Alutha peak is **Kallidum Kundru** where you will have to **throw the pebble picked earlier**. According to the legend, this is where Mahishi was buried.

Continuous walking will take us to INCHIPARA KOTA, MUKKUZHI AND KARIYALAN THODU. At a suitable site in this stretch will be our camp for the night. The Guruswami will choose the site. We should be there by 4 pm. Camp here is no different from the earlier night and 6 am is the wake up call. The next day is the same WALK, WALK AND MORE WALK and of course Swamie Saranam-Ayyappa Saranam all the way.

It's the Kari Malai climb now and before you realize we are at Karimala peak and negotiating the Karimala erakkam.

Soon we will be at Perianna Vattom and Cherianna Vattom and a sigh of relief comes from the Swamies faces. We will be at Pamba.

PAMBA ACTIVITY

At Pamba, after a short rest, Swamies will head for the Pampa River for a bath. It is here that King Rajasekara found baby Manikandan and this is the River, which is equivalent to the Ganges in holiness. A bath in Pamba will get rid of all your tiredness and the sight of Swamies enjoying a shopping spree for Tulasi malais, books and Ayyappan pictures in common. Please practise your bargaining skills with the gypsy master salesmen and women.

Kanni Swamies Assignment

All Kanni Swamies irrespective of age will have to go around Pampa and collect ashes from 108 stoves of Ayyappas who are cooking the food. Please do not collect from the shops. It is believed that our Lord Ayyappan will be a guest among the devotees at all the places food is prepared by the Swamies. After the ashes are collected it has to be sieved clean and handed to the Guruswamy.

Pampa is also the place where the Swamies can perform PITRU TARPANAM (offering for the departed souls within your family) There will be many priests lining the banks of the river to do these rites. It will only cost you about 10 to 20 rupees.

SABARI MALAI !!! HERE WE COME

It's now the final climb to meet our beloved Dharma Sastha, who will be waiting to shower us with his entire blessing but not without any tests. He will test your patience, faith, love, etc for him. Swamies should adopt the Swamie Saranam attitude to pass all the tests with flying colors.

There may be policeman trying to irritate you. There may be other Swamies in a hurry trying to push you in their anxiety. Whatever happens, don't forget the magical mantra “ SWAMIYE SARANAM AYYAPPA “. The Pamba Sannidhanam distance is about 7 kms.

You start ascending Neeli malai by breaking a coconut for Pamba Ganapathy and proceed to visit the shrines of Lord

Rama, Lord Hanuman and Sree Parvathy. A short distance away is the Shrine of the Pandala Raja where a representative sits down, offering vibhuthi prasatham to Swamies. Pay your respect here and offer a small kannika. According to the legend, the Sabari Malai Ayyappan temple belongs to the Pandala Raja's family and Swamies must seek their permission before proceeding with their visit.

Please don't think it is an easy climb. Neeli Malai is no different from Alutha and Karimalai. Proceed slowly and take your time. The Neeli Malai peak is called Appachi Medu. Here there are 2 abysses called the Appachi kuzhi and the Ippachi Kuzhi. (Abyss means a big hole) Some Swamies throw rice balls here with the belief that it will calm the evil spirits around here.

Short distance away is Sabari Pheedam, the place where great Tapaswini, Sree Sabari waited for Sree Rama and Sree Lakshmana To get Moksha, She waited patiently for many years before meeting them there that the hill itself is named after her.

As we proceed comes SARAMKUTHI. (Place for the Kanni Swamies to pierce the wooden arrow they received from the Guruswamy during Petta Thullal). This is to mark their presence when Manja Matha comes visiting and looking if any Kanni Swamies have come to Sabari Malai this year. From here, the holy 18 steps is your next climb. So near yet so far. That's the only way to describe the long queues that seem to be always there. It's like a non-stop chain of people following the queues through the bar codes in the Nadapanthal. With the Lord's blessing, let's hope and pray that our wait won't be unusually long. There is a record of

Swamies taking as long as over 15 hours to reach the 18 steps. Just beside the 18 steps is the place to shatter your coconut and immediately climb the 18 steps chanting SWAMIYE SARANAM AYYAPPA. Policemen are stationed along the way to assist the swamies climb. As soon as we reach the top is the Kodi Maram (Flag Post). We are almost there to meet our beloved Lord Ayyappa but a little more patience is needed. We need to proceed on a flyover that will take us around the temple and bring us in front of the Sanctum Sanctorum. As we follow the queue, we come face to face with our loving almighty sitting there meditating for the world in his Patabanda and Chinmudra pose. He is silently blessing the devotees who are only able to shout full-throated Swamiye Saranam Ayyapa. The swamies need to move on swiftly and make room for the next swamies coming in rows to see the bagawan.

We move on to Kannimula Ganapathy and Nagaraja Shrines darshanam and look out for the rest of the Swamies to proceed to our next campsite. At the campsite, the Guruswami will take your Irumudi and place it on the ground and swamies can rest for a while till the instructions for the next programme is announced.

The Guruswamies will arrange to open the Irumudi Kattu and arrange for the Ghee Abhishegam. At the same time, all the other items from the front portion of the Irumudi will be taken and sorted out. The swamies must be present when the ghee coconut is being broken.

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The ash from 108 stoves will be mixed together with all the vibhuthi together and placed in a tray. Panneer will then be added together and batthi will be lighted on the vibhuthi.

The next programme is for Guruswamies to lead the Swamies carrying this tray of vibhuthi to the Shrines of Sree Maligapurathamma, Nava Grahas and Naga Devas. At the Maligapurathamma's Shrine, the Swamies give the blouse pieces they have bought along for the Devi's blessing and take them back. The Kanni Swamies here have to roll a coconut around the Shrine.

Swamie will be offering the manjal (tumeric stick) from the Irumudi to our Maligapurathamma.

In the meantime, one Guruswamie will take all the ghee for Abhishegam for our beloved Swamie Ayyappa.

Upon return from the Abhishegam, the ghee together with other items from the Irumudi will be packed for the Swamis to take home as prasadham.

The swamies should carefully keep this prasadham in their Irumudi bags for taking back home.

On the return journey to Pampa, the Irumudi can be carried in the hand. However, when the Swamies return home, please carry it on your head while the family members doing the Patha Pooja for you and go straight into your pooja room and place it on your altar. You can show deeparathana to our Lord Ayyappa.

Some Swamies purchase some sweets from India to be given to the family members together with the Prasadham.

Now you can arrange to remove your Mala either by your Guruswamy or by any temple priest. However, some books say that the Mala should be removed by your Gurusamy at the same place where you put your Mala on.

It's good to recite the following mantra while removing the Mala :-

**Aboorva masala rohi
Dhivya dharshana kaarana
Saasthru mudhraath maha deva
Dhehime viratha vimosanam**

On the following day you can have your hair cut .

However, for Swamies who go to Sabari Malai, it is important to observe vegetable diet on every Saturday and if possible on Wednesdays and Fridays too. Saturday and Wednesday is our Lord's Day.

Swamiye saranam ayyappa

Any clarifications on the above guidelines please consult your gurusamis.