





★ QUESTS

Dares for the brave and the curious. The map marks each with a star; tick them off as you go.

★ 5

Walk the whole cliff, end to end. North Cliff to the south cliff on the paved path. Papanasam below you. Stop at every café's view, keep to the path, and count the surfboards on the way.

★ 3

Find a spring falling out of the cliff. The sandstone holds rainwater and the hard cap pushes it out of the face: look for the thin falls of fresh water at the cliff's foot, from the sand.

★ 1

Read the cliff like a book. From the beach, find the dark red cap on top, then the pale and ochre bands below it. Millions of years, layer by layer. Look for the black line of lignite.

★ 19

Stand up on a board. Book a morning lesson in the surf season. Lie, paddle, pop up, fall off, repeat. Waist-deep water, soft sand underneath, an instructor beside you.

★ 10

Eat putt with kadala for breakfast. Steamed cylinders of rice and grated coconut, pushed out of the pot in a log. Crumble it into the black chickpea curry, or eat it with a banana.

★ 36

Pedal a boat on Kappil Lake. The tourism department's boat club hires pedal boats where the lake meets the sea. Then walk the bridge and look both ways: backwater one side, sea the other.

★ 33

Row to the golden island. Take a country boat from Nedunganda through the backwaters to Ponnunthuruthi. The story says Travancore's queens hid their gold here: look for cormorants and egrets instead.

★ 24

Find the tunnel built for boats. Inland from the cliff, a canal goes straight into the hill: one of two tunnels Travancore finished in 1877 and 1880 so boats could sail to Trivandrum.

★ 15

Watch a hero's face go green. Get to a Kathakali show early and watch the make-up go on: green for the hero, red lips, then the eyes that tell the story without a word.

★ 5

Spot a Brahminy kite. Chestnut wings, a white head, gliding along the cliff at eye level. Count how many pass before your tea goes cold.

★ 19

Join a game on Black Beach. Most afternoons someone has a cricket bat, a volleyball or a football on the sand. Ask to play; lose graciously.

14 A cliff older than the Himalayas' foothills? Close

The cliff's layers, South Cliff. The only sea cliffs in southern Kerala, a National Geological Monument: sandstone, clay and lignite from the Miocene and Pliocene under red laterite, on UNESCO's tentative list since 2025. The quiet South Cliff shows the layers best. Keep back from the edge.

20 Meet the karimeen before lunch does

Varkala Aquarium. A small public aquarium on the road above Black Beach, steps from Zostel Varkala: scorpionfish, angelfish, koi and karimeen, the pearl spot Kerala's kitchens love. Modest, sometimes half empty: a quick look on a hot day.

24 A canal that goes through a hill

The Varkala Tunnel. A laterite hill blocked the waterway, so Travancore cut through it: two canal tunnels, the longer about 720 m, dug from 1867 and finished by 1880, for boats of coir, rice and cashew. See the brick portals from the bank.

28 The beach the crowds haven't found

Odayam beach. North of Black Beach on the cliff path: one of Varkala's least crowded beaches, gentle waves for floating, a few small cafés set back from the sand. Little shade, so go heavy on sunscreen. Turn back here or walk on to Edava.

35 Lake on one side, sea on the other

Kappil beach and the Pozhi. Where the backwater and the sea run side by side, a road apart, and the lake meets the sea at the Pozhi. Kappil beach is secluded sand and rock under palms. About 6 km north of the cliffs.

37 The old port where the backwaters begin

Kollam and Ashtamudi lake. About 35 km up the coast: old Quilon, an ancient port on Ashtamudi lake and the world's cashew capital. Boats go to Munroe Island's canals, and the backwater cruise runs on to Alappuzha, home of Zostel Alleppey.

38 The backwater behind the beach

Edava-Nadaya lake. Another arm of the backwater, behind Edava's beaches: quiet local water, fishing canoes and palms, almost no visitors. Boat rides run here as at Kappil, ask locally, or walk the lakeside lanes in the morning cool.

KADAL, LAKE, ISLAND

1 Where the cliff starts and the gliders launch

The helipad. The flat cliff top where the road from town ends: the cliff path runs north, steps drop to Papanasam. Sandy day and red laterite lie open here. October to March, tandem paragliders launch when the wind allows. Stand well back from the edge.

MEEN, PLEASE

4 Point at a fish. They'll cook it.

The catch on ice, North Cliff. At dusk the cliff's seafood places lay the day's catch on ice at the door: kingfish, snapper, tiger prawns, squid. Point, then pick grilled, tandoor or Kerala masala. Ask what came in that morning, and the weight first.

6 Wood-fired, open-air, bread baked here

Abba Restaurant and German Bakery. An open-air garden on the North Cliff: a wood-fired oven, bread baked in-house, breakfasts from Indian to Tibetan. Our guide picked it for the seafood. Shade enough to sit long; Darjeeling Café is steps away.

7 Prawns and fish, cooked the local way

Café del Mar. A North Cliff regular, the beach below. Our guide went for prawns and fish cooked the local way; there are pizzas and grills for the rest of the table. Ask for the fish Kerala style.

8 Momos on a Kerala cliff

Little Tibet. The cliff's Tibetan kitchen, the Himalayan end of menus that run from Kerala to Himalayan: momos, chapati rolls, fresh juice and fruit salad. Plain and filling. Order a second plate of momos before the first is gone.

16 The nightly catch, a long menu

Clafouti. On the North Cliff since at least 2015: a long menu and the night's catch. Ask what came in that day, have it grilled or in a Kerala masala. Busy at sunset, so come early or late.

17 Big breakfasts, Tibetan plates, a dosa too

Darjeeling Café. A few metres from Abba: big breakfasts and Tibetan dishes, and these days a masala dosa and a Kerala chicken curry too. Take the friend who can't decide; the menu covers most of the map.

18 Quick, cheap-ish, upstairs over Black Beach

Trattorias. At the north end of the cliff, over Black Beach and closest to Zostel Varkala: homely Indian and pan-Asian plates, quick and easy on the pocket, views from upstairs. The dinner for a night you've walked enough.

25 A plain vegetarian hotel, local prices

Hotel Suprabatham. In Kerala a 'ho-tel' is often a restaurant. Suprabatham is a plain, fully vegetarian one, where the town eats away from the cliff's menus and bills. No view, just a meal. Point at what the next table is having.

GREEN FACES, LONG NIGHTS

2 Oil, steam and a government nature cure

Ayurveda and the Nature Cure Hospital. Ayurveda signs line the cliff: choose centres with registered practitioners. By the helipad, the government Nature Cure Hospital (1978, 60 beds) treats with sun, water, mud, diet and massage. Mention any condition before treatment.

13 A Dutch ship's bell in a Vishnu temple

Janardhana Swamy temple. Up a long flight of steps above Papanasam: Vishnu's temple, said to be two thousand years old, with a copper-roofed round sanctum and a Dutch ship's bell. Arattu in March or April brings Kathakali nights. Inner shrine for Hindus only.

15 Watch a face become a god

Kathakali on the North Cliff. Kerala's dance-drama of the epics, told in mime, drums and painted faces. The centre on the North Cliff plays for travellers with English commentary. Come early to watch the make-up go on, layer by layer. Ask for the day's timings.

34 Everyone hauls, the whole beach watches

Shore-net fishing at Vettakkada. Kerala's old shore seine, karamadi: a boat rows the net out in a half circle, and two teams haul the ropes in hand over hand until the catch comes up the sand. A fading craft. Watch from the side; ask before pictures.

STAYED FOR THE SURF

21 The cheap way out of town

Varkala bus terminal. Next to the station, the municipal bus terminal: local buses to Kollam, Jatyau and the hills; state buses to Thiruvananthapuram and Ponnudi. Ask at the stand which bus goes where, and come early.

22 Almost every train stops here

Varkala Sivagiri station. Varkala's station on the Kollam-Thiruvananthapuram line, where almost every train stops; open since 1918, named for Sivagiri in 2005. Tourist information on the forecourt; autos wait outside. The cliff is about 3 km west.

★ 5

Eat the day's catch on the cliff. Pick your fish from the ice at a cliff-top café and ask for it: the local way, grilled, or in a coconut curry. Then watch the sea it came from.

★ 4

Say nannì to whoever pours your chaya. Thank you is nannì, tea is chaya. Order one, say it, and see who answers in Malayalam.

★ 19

Call something adipoli. Superb in Malayalam, for a meal, a wave or a view. Use it once a day and watch it land.

★ 28

Walk north to the fishermen. Early, walk past Black Beach to Odayam and towards Kappil while the fishing crews bring in the catch. Ask before a photo; lend a hand only if asked.

★ 19

Find the black sand. Thiruvambadi, Black Beach, sits at the cliff's north end. Pick up a handful and see what's dark in it.

★ 5

Take a morning yoga class. The cliff has yoga centres by the dozen; drop in for one class before the heat, mat facing the sea.

On the North Cliff

Zostel Varkala. A pastel green and blue building among coconut trees on the North Cliff, a five-minute walk from Black Beach: sea views from the rooftop, the rooms and the balconies, a veranda round every room, and A-frame cottages.

RED CLIFF, OLD STORIES

3 The beach under the red wall

Papanasam beach. A strip of sand at the foot of the cliff, between the North and South cliffs. Papanasam means 'destroyer of sins'; many hold the sea here sacred. Fishing boats at dusk. Rough in the monsoon: swim where the life-guard's flags say.

29 Where the red cliff runs out

The cliff's north end, Odayam. The red cliff's last stand above Odayam: look south along the laterite and palms to the North Cliff, north over long beaches. Best early, when the light is soft. Unfenced, crumbling edge: keep well back.

32 The world's biggest bird sculpture, on a rock

Jatyau Earth's Center. On a rock at Chadayamangalam lies Jatyau, the Ramayana's bird who fell fighting Ravana: 200 feet long, the world's largest bird sculpture. Climb 826 steps or take the cable car. About an hour's ride from Zostel Varkala.

33 An island temple by country boat

Ponnunthuruthi (Golden Island). South of Varkala in the Anchuthengu backwater: the Golden Island, where legend hid a queen's gold. Country boats go from Nedunganda to its Shiva Parvathi temple in coconut groves. Cormorants, egrets, herons. lit up at Sivarathri.

5 One long path, the sea on your left

The North Cliff path. Varkala's high street is a footpath on a sea cliff: cafés, yoga shalas, ayurveda rooms and beach shops on one side, the drop on the other. It runs north past Black Beach towards Odayam. No railing in places: keep to the path.

19 Dark sand, morning waves, our home next door

Black Beach (Thiruvambadi). The dark-sand beach at the north end of the cliff, quieter than Papanasam. Mornings belong to surfers: schools teach beginners on soft-tops, October to April. Later, locals play cricket and football; ask to join. Zostel Varkala is a short walk.

36 Pedal the backwater, palms all round

Kappil lake boat club. A calm estuary in coconut groves, 6 km north of town. The tourism boat club hires pedal boats, kayaks go out, and the bridge is the best free view. Varkala's taste of the backwaters. Wear a life jacket.

10 Vegetarian, first door off the helipad

Outupura Vegetarian Restaurant. Almost the first restaurant you meet from the helipad, and all vegetarian: the easy answer on a cliff that runs on fish. Come hungry, ask what's Kerala on the menu today, and eat with your hand if you like.

11 Buddha bowls and desserts with a view

Inda Café. Near the cliff: Buddha bowls, eggs Benedict and desserts, the healthy-breakfast address after an early surf. If it's full, walk a few doors along the cliff and come back.

12 Kerala thali, vegetarian or not

Shiva Garden Kerala Restaurant. Traditional Kerala thalis, vegetarian or not: rice at the centre, curries round it, fish on the non-veg plate. Have one before you go back to the smoothie bowls, and mix each curry into the rice in turn.

26 Cakes for the train

Reena Bakers. In town, a short walk from the station: pastries and cakes for the train, or the first snack off it. Look past the cakes at what the people ahead of you buy, and buy that too.

SMELLS LIKE INCENSE

9 Beads, bowls and souvenirs on the cliff

Tibetan market. A little market on the North Cliff. Coffee Temple beside it, the Juice Shack behind: souvenirs, beaded jewellery and Tibetan handicrafts, sold here for years. Walk the whole row first, and bargain with a smile.

27 Where the town buys its fish

Puthenchantha fish market. South-east of the station, where Varkala buys its fish. A new market building stood unused in September 2026, so the selling happens next door and by the roadside. Watch, and learn to choose fish.

23 One caste, one religion, one God

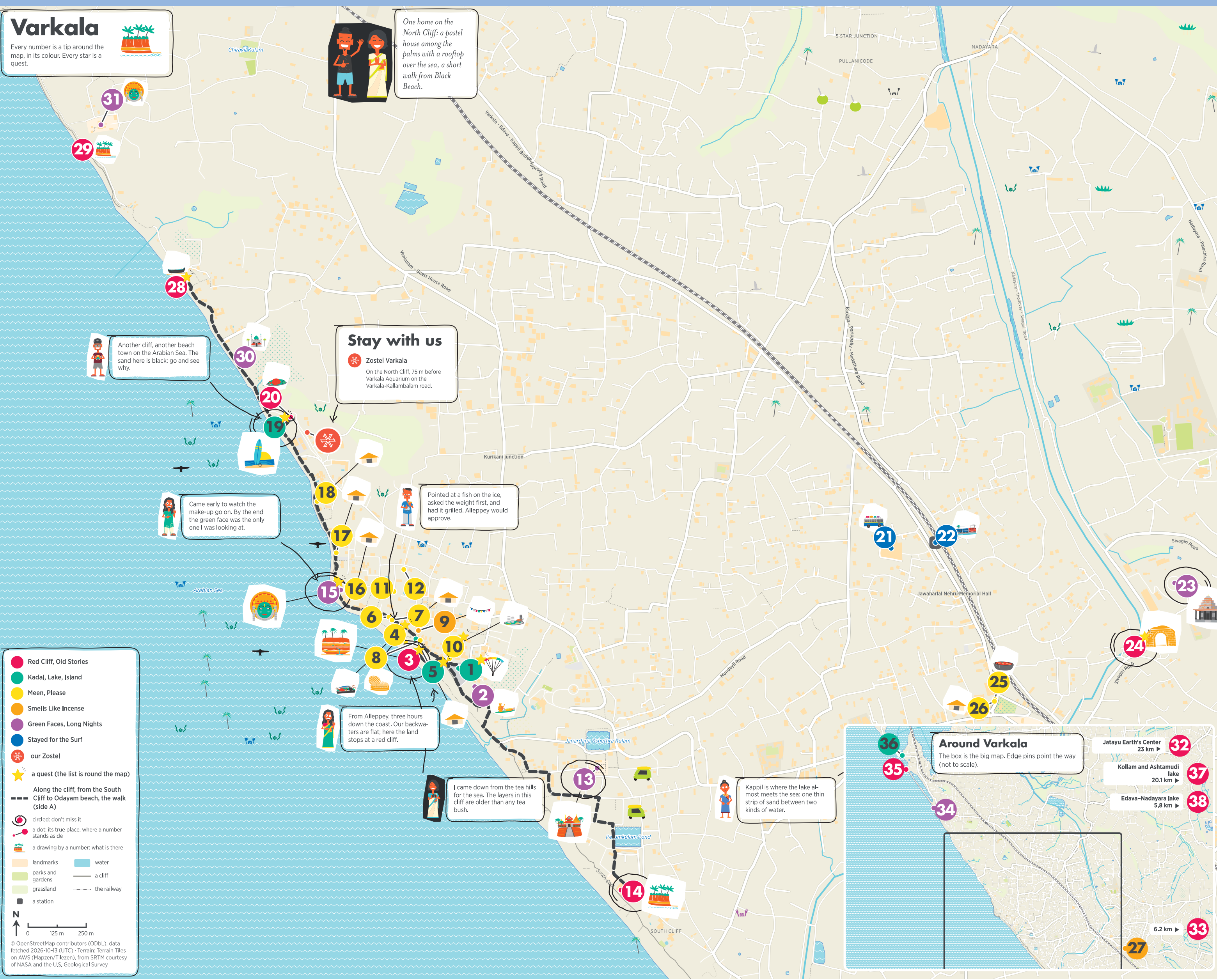
Sivagiri: Sree Narayana Guru's samadhi. Sree Narayana Guru, who taught 'one caste, one religion, one God', settled on this hill in 1904; his samadhi draws thousands. See his octagonal Sarada temple of 1912, with windows. Pilgrims in yellow fill it at New Year.

30 The mosque on the road to Odayam

Odayam Juma Masjid. The Friday mosque of the Odayam coast, on the lane from Black Beach. Nearly three in ten people in Varkala are Muslim (2011 census). A working mosque: dress modestly, ask before stepping in, avoid prayer times.

31 Nine elephants and peacock dancers

Thiruvambadi Sree Krishna temple, Manthara. The Sree Krishna temple at Manthara, at the cliff's north end. Its Arattu closes with nine decorated elephants and folk arts: Ammankudam's tall pots and Mayilattam, the peacock dance. Ashtami Rohini is the other big day. Dress modestly.



Red Cliff, Old Stories

Kadal, Lake, Island

Meen, Please

Smells Like Incense

Green Faces, Long Nights

Stayed for the Surf

our Zostel

a quest (the list is round the map)

Along the cliff, from the South Cliff to Odayam beach, the walk (side A)

circled: don't miss it

a dot: its true place, where a number stands aside

a drawing by a number: what is there

landmarks

parks and gardens

grassland

a station

water

a cliff

the railway

0 125 m 250 m

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