

Malayalam Pronunciation Guide

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For English speakers - the sounds that trip you up, made simple

Dr. Reshmi R Nair, PhD

You don't need the script to sound good. Master these sounds in romanised Malayalam and you'll be understood anywhere.

VOWELS - SHORT vs LONG (length matters!)

a / aa	'a' in cup / 'a' in father
i / ee	'i' in sit / 'ee' in see
u / oo	'u' in put / 'oo' in food
e / ai	'e' in bed / 'ai' in aisle
o / au	'o' in or / 'ow' in cow

RETROFLEX vs DENTAL (curl your tongue)

t / d / n (retroflex)	curl tongue back to the roof - harder
th / dh / n (dental)	tongue on the teeth - softer
Example: 'kutti'	'tt' is retroflex + held (child)
Why it matters	the swap can change the word
Beginner tip	copy the audio, don't overthink it

THE 'ZHA' SOUND - Malayalam's signature

What it is	between 'r', 'l' and 'zh'; curl tongue, don't touch roof
mazha	rain (MA-zha)
vazhi	way / path (VA-zhi)
Kozhikode	the city (KO-zhi-kode)
Don't panic	a soft 'r/l' is understood fine

OTHER SOUNDS TO KNOW

nga	'ng' as in 'singer' - even at the start
l / L	plain 'l' vs retroflex 'L' (tongue curled)
cha	soft 'ch' as in 'church'
kh gh th dh ph bh	aspirated - add a puff of air

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Part 2 - word length, Kerala names & quick tips

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DOUBLE CONSONANTS - HOLD THEM LONGER

kk ll mm tt pp	pause slightly on a doubled letter
kallu	stone (double L, held)
kaalu	leg (long vowel, single l)
Rushing them	makes you hard to follow

5 QUICK TIPS

- 1. Even pace** don't punch one syllable like English
- 2. Vowel length** 'a' vs 'aa' can change the word
- 3. Curl back** for retroflex t / d / n / L
- 4. 'Zha'** approximate with soft 'r/l' - fine
- 5. Best practice** hear a line, then shadow it aloud

SAY THESE KERALA NAMES RIGHT

Malayalam	ma-la-YAA-lam
Kerala	KE-ra-la
Kozhikode	KO-zhi-koad (the 'zha')
Thiruvananthapuram	thi-roo-va-nan-tha-pu-ram
Thrissur	THRI-shoor
Onam	OH-nam

Pronunciation is a listening skill - train your ear free

25 slowed-down audio conversations with transcripts, a 30-day course & flashcards with native audio. Listen, then shadow. Scan or visit:

speakmalayalam.com/malayalam-listen.html

