

TANTALISING TAMIL NADU

There's much more to this South Indian state than just temples

Writer Devanshi Mody



Legend-steeped Tamil Nadu pulsates with over 100,000 temples. Think millennial architectural marvels whose soaring tops dizzyingly stack sculpted divinity, deities from the tremendous pantheon of Hindu gods. Underlying this seeming multiplicity is the ancient Vedantic concept of Brahman, the undivided supreme consciousness, from which the universe emanated, to which you connect in yoga and merge in moksha.

Tamil Nadu is a tumult of colour

and sound. But there's a pervasive and palpable spirituality that connects you to that ineffable beyond. The French have long been lured by the spiritual 'connect' of India's southernmost state. But now tourists from everywhere declare Madurai's Meenakshi Temple more astonishing than the Taj Mahal. But there's more to Tamil Nadu than temples. Across a sweeping diversity of landscapes, discover Chettinad's splendid heritage mansions, Rameswaram's beaches, tea gardens and tiger reserves in

the Nilgiris and hill stations where Raj-timers fled from the smouldering southern summers.

Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai has the world's largest expat population of Japanese and Koreans and an accumulating French, German, American and British contingent living it up in massive pooled beach villas. Amidst Chennai's cosmopolitan jazz, Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music survives through a flourish of entralling dance and music festivals.



PREVIOUS PAGE: CGH Earth Mantra Koodam opens to a shrine set on a tree-lined temple tank. THIS PAGE: Svatma was transformed into a boutique hotel that showcases Tamil Nadu's age-old arts

SVATMA TANJAVUR

A Bharatanatyam dancer transformed her uncle's 150-year-old mansion into a boutique hotel in 2016, resolutely about Tamil Nadu's age-old arts. Mahabalipuram rock sculptures, Swamimalai bronzes, Chettinad woodcraft, Kumbakonam brass lamps and bejewelled Tanjavur paintings meld in contemporary chic. Antiques adorn plush gardens and spurt water into the veranda's waterways. Sunken sun-beds arched on ornate sculpted rock pedestals surround the artful pool; the spa takes up a whole floor.

On the terrace handsome Chettinadu pillars become the bar with geometric tiles. The restaurant has swings for chairs, Brahminical Tanjavur thalis for lunch, chiselled seven-course South Indian

suppers worth a Michelin star and a chef worth kidnapping. Svatma is all-veg and glamorous. Tanjavur engendered unique genres of every classical art (music, dance, painting, sculpture and literature). This temple-town's prodigious heritage unveils exhilarating cultural performances at Svatma whose young GM Sridhar is encyclopaedic about the Chola Empire.

Pre-Svatma the architecturally ingenious, sculpturally superior Chola temples that inspired Angkor Wat languished in abandon. Even if the 1,000-year-old, stupendous Brihadisvara Temple staggers while Tanjavur's Bronze Gallery has goddesses more alluring than Botticelli's Venus, to protect them you must hire Angelina Jolie to visit...

www.svatma.in





THE TAMARA KODAI

Spanking new! A 160-year-old Jesuit monastery has become the first ultra-luxe resort on the green hills of Kodaikanal, where stylish spaces and cloisters turn into slick lily ponds. Lake-view clusters dotting groomed gardens each comprise four exquisite suites whose dark wood floors, doors and vintage-look furniture usher in the forest. Bistro 1845 occupies the erstwhile library – have breakfast amidst leather-bound books or sit al fresco on quaint patios by billowing verdure. Lunch on French-style terraces whose crimson-shaded umbrellas overlook manicured gardens bounteous with plum and pear trees. La Providence has monastic stone walls but this restaurant’s 15 chefs and four cuisine varieties are anything but ascetic.

Nature, world-class golf and handmade chocolate are Kodaikanal’s greatest luxuries. Now it has its first spa and heated outdoor pool, a lotus-shaped beauty presiding on a hillock. The lovely elevated spa seemingly levitates on a sea of green. But



real rejuvenation is in activities crafted by suave Syed Mehaboob, unique guest experience manager. You have Coolie Ghat Trek on the colonial courier-dispatch path where leopards lurk, visits to reserve forests and cycling circuits to remote lake-

studded plains. Local flavour comes with Ravi, officially resort guide, but actually walking forest-pharmacy and culinary expert dispensing herbal cures for all ailments and strange forest growths for biryanis. www.thetamara.com



THIS PAGE: Set on the green hills of Kodaikanal, The Tamara Kodai features exquisite suites in a former Jesuit monastery. OPPOSITE PAGE: CGH Earth Visalam is housed in a tasteful Art Deco heritage bungalow with romantic gardens

CGH EARTH VISALAM

Amongst the loveliest boutique hotels you’ll see, the tasteful Art Deco heritage bungalow built as dowry for a pretty young bride has a haunting romance about it. Basked in gardens galore it boasts a courtyard in midnight blue Belgian stone, floors richly tessellated with Athangudi tiles and abundant Burma teak crafted into ceilings and furniture. Vast rooms feature enormous four-poster beds, bathrooms where luxurious coconut oil replaces body lotion and verandas opening onto gardens embowered in golden flowers. Here and there an artistic bench, antique cart or indigenous pot imparts charm to the verdancy enlivened by birdsong.

By night the gardens become perfumed enchantment, the edifice blushing as if in the glow of embers. Plastic and Coke are no-nos. Instead you have all-natural elixirs with jaggery and palm sugar. You can dine on terraces, at the gardened pool or by candlelight during Earth Hour when the eco-

conscious hotel turns off its lights. Lunch offers a banquet on a banana leaf with produce from Visalam’s own gardens, while breakfast is served on a garden pavilion

where crimson bougainvillea sometimes softly descending onto your plate of local specialities.

www.cghearth.com



HERITAGE MADURAI

Iconic architect Geoffrey Bawa brings contemporary style to India's second oldest living city, known for clean lines, sparse interiors, open spaces, pillared pavilions and stretches of sleek garden. The majestic pool replicates an ancient temple tank while the reception showcases an elaborate carved wooden door from a royal fort. Villas come with dark wood furniture and stone-floor open bathrooms endowed with private plunge pools that trees arch over.

Romance inheres in Madurai whose fish-eyed goddess Meenakshi and her consort Siva is a love story celebrated at the Meenakshi Temple, a love poem in rock of unbelievable grandeur.

On average Chinese tourists visit thrice annually, and the Japanese wed in its hypnotic environs with the scent of jasmine, emblematic of the city, and dawn-picked as oblation to the goddess.

Madurai is as sensual as it is sacred and the hotel captures its romance in



Madurai Malli Spa rituals and dinners with ingredients from its flower and spice markets, which are a carnival of colour and fragrance. Amidst a profusion of jasmine

and roses suppers unfold culminating in local speciality *jigarthanda*, ambrosial with almonds. www.heritagemadurai.com



THIS PAGE: Heritage Madurai brings contemporary style to the city. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy vegetarian maharaja thalis at CGH Earth Mantra Koodam

CGH EARTH MANTRA KOODAM

This new sanctuary nestled in opulent paddy fields opens to a shrine set on a tree-lined temple tank. Cottages and bungalows scatter across preened gardens. Bathrooms with open-air showers thrill while the pool splashes urbanity upon the emphatic rural experience. On the restaurant's gardenised verandas relish vegetarian maharaja thalis whose compositions weave in nuanced flavours as intricate as the famous silk saris woven around here. Then the Mantra tea kadai charmingly recreates a village tea shop with complimentary local snacks. Discover fabled Kumbakonam Degree Coffee prepared fresh tumbling coffee across filters held a metre apart.

Temple Town Kumbakonam has the world's highest concentration of temples and Mantra is a luxury pad from which to explore the legendary Great Living Chola Temples, nine Navagraha temples dedicated to the nine planets and 5,000 other temples. Afterwards you'll need a

massage in the Ayurveda spa. Thereafter shop for Swamimalai's extraordinary bronze icons that Augustin Rodin called "the most perfect movement of rhythmic movement

in art". Unless you have an astrologer's appointment – Astrological Tourism is a new phenomenon impelling everyone from China to Chile. www.cgheart.com



RAJAKKAD ESTATE, PALAN

An 18th-century palace 1,000m up on the Palani Hills engulfed by coffee and pepper plantations amidst a mosaic of pools, courtyards, gardens and an on-site farm. The British owner dismantled and tastefully reassembled Pallam Palace, an intricate ensemble of wood composed in southern style, making a seven-room hideaway for the discerning few. Internet is deliberately slow. The message is clear: disconnect! And give yourself up to nature. Listen to the birds, not the ping of your phone.

The hotel is run like a private home, communal meals are European-flashed South Indian fare with ingredients mostly from the estate itself. People usually withdraw here to read, write, paint and walk. Another draw is hilltop Palani Temple,

among the Six Abodes of Lord Murugan, magically ablaze with what seems a billion swaying lamps on festival days. www.rajakkadestate.com

INTERCONTINENTAL CHENNAI MAHABALIPURAM RESORT

The InterContinental turns preconceptions about what a Mahabalipuram resort should be – relaxed, accessible beach accommodation – on its head. Snooty, sexy and not quite in Mahabalipuram, it stands aloof from other luxury resorts surrounding the spectacular seventh-century Shore Temple.

A compact driveway leads to the lobby, a dusky enclosure sealed with lofty Mahabalipuram granite walls perhaps



THIS PAGE: Rajakkad Estate is housed in the 18th-century Pallam Palace. OPPOSITE PAGE: There is no better place for R&R than the InterContinental Chennai Mahabalipuram Resort

recalling the heritage site's sculpted cavernous shrines or a temple sanctum – except you don't expect suave leather sofas in a temple. A granite walkway, long like the Shore Temple's superb reclining Vishnu figure, strides between an Aman-esque pool

fortressed in granite walls and lotus ponds spouting palm trees.

Ultra-modern rooms beckon when the blazing afternoon sun makes it too hot to visit the bewitching Pallava monuments, instead melt in the spa with a candle

massage. Then hit Gatsby Bar before beachfront dining while Concierge manage your shopping extravagances, usually those amazing Mahabalipuram rock sculptures whose delicate workmanship belies they weigh a ton. www.ihg.com

