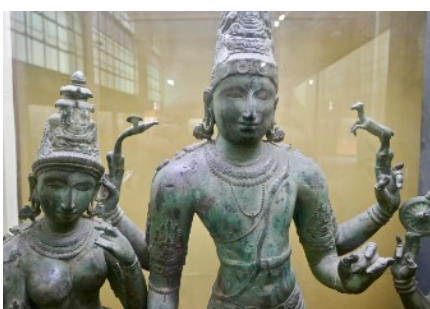


TAMIL NADU 'INDIA'S ANCIENT SACRED HEART'



ITINERARY:

Start and End in Chennai; 14 days/13 nights



Day 1

Land at Chennai International Airport. Transfer (1.5h) to **Fisherman's Cove**, a lovely beach resort operated by the Taj Hotels Group and renowned for its seafood, extensive grounds and beach occupying the site of an old Dutch fort and trading post (**2 nights**). We contract Sea-Facing rooms in the main building. Optional afternoon sightseeing at nearby DakshinaChitra, a living museum dedicated to South Indian heritage and culture, with original architectural examples of houses from the South.

Day 2

Morning visit of nearby UNESCO WHS Mahabalipuram with its huge bas-reliefs and prototype temples carved out of solid granite; this is where the Southern Indian style of temple architecture was first developed. Lunch at a renowned local fish restaurant. Afternoon at leisure and evening beachside dinner.

Day 3

AM Mid morning drive (2.5h) to colonial Pondicherry, France's Indian enclave. **3 nights** at **Maison Perumal**,

a 13 room boutique hotel in an historical double courtyard Tamil Mansion. The property is rightfully renowned for its delicious Tamil food PM Late afternoon cycle rickshaw ride & visit of the surprisingly tranquil French and Tamil historical quarters

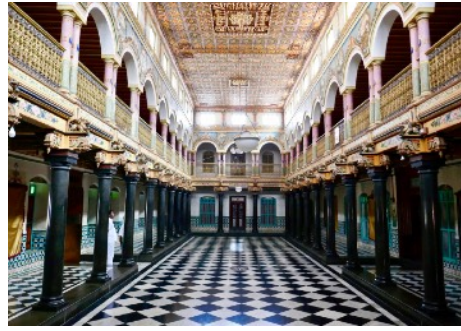
Day 4

We spend today in Auroville, a unique international community experiment, originally founded by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram but now self-governing. We have unique access through a guide born there. Lunch at their organic farm restaurant. Auroville has been at the forefront of architectural design and technological innovation.

Day 5

AM Guided tour of Pondicherry's streets, temples, colourful market, and a chance to sample the local coffee (The southern equivalent of the northern Masala Chai).

PM At leisure to explore the historical quarter independently or just relax. Dinner at Palais de Mahe, in the French quarter and a sister property of Maison Perumal, specialising in Franco Tamil cuisine.



Day 6

AM Departure for Chitambaram Nataraj temple (2h drive), one of the largest in the State and unique in India as it is privately owned by the local hereditary Brahmin priest community. Continue to the lovely **Mantra Koodam** resort (**2 nights**) with bungalows spread over extensive manicured grounds. This rural area of the Kaveri delta, southern India's greatest river, is the heart of Tamil Nadu's rice growing belt. **PM** Late afternoon tuck tuck ride & walk in the surrounding villages and countryside, locally known as 'little Kerala' because of its similar landscape of paddy, spices and coconut plantations.

Day 7

AM Visit the nearby UNESCO WHS Darasuram temple, dating from the 9th - 12th Chola dynasty. The Cholas were a powerful seafaring nation that spread from Tamil Nadu to much of South East Asia. They built the first temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and are the reason Indonesia's shadow puppet theatre still recounts stories from the Hindu epics. Located just outside the 'temple town' of Kumbakonam Darasuram temple is one of Southern India's architectural treasures, with surprisingly fine carvings despite being constructed in very hard ancient granite. We then visit the bustling morning vegetable market that takes place daily around the temple and is reputed to be the biggest in Asia.

PM Back at our resort for lunch and a chance to swim in their lovely pool. Late afternoon bullock cart ride (Very comfortable, with 4 tyres, padded seats and sun shade, seats 8 people).

Day 8

AM Depart for Tanjore (2h drive) to visit the royal palace, which though not as impressive as those of Rajasthan displays one of the best collections of the world-renowned Chola Bronzes, mostly depicting Nataraj (Lord Shiva in the cosmic dance pose). We then visit the UNESCO WHS Raja Raja temple complex, the very first great Chola temple, renowned for its size and the fine frescoed cloister that surrounds it. Tanjore is one of India's craft centres and in particular bronze casting and painting. We can watch the 'lost wax' method still being employed in a small foundry as well as the Tanjore School paintings of mostly Hindu religious subjects.

PM After a 'thali' lunch in Tanjore we continue (2.5h drive) to Chettinad District and **Visalam**, our hotel, for **2 nights**. Late afternoon stroll around the village of Kanadukathan, which is strewn with great mansions. The Chettinad region is renowned for its huge palaces built, in Burmese teak and Italian marbles, from 1857 to the 1930s by a Brahmin community who became great traders in British Asian dominions. Nowadays they mostly live abroad but return to

their ancestral homes in Chettinad for special family events. Our boutique hotel is such a mansion in Art Deco style.

Day 9

AM Morning guided exploration of the local surroundings, with villages, crafts such as the renowned local tile and sweets productions, weekly market, visit of Chettinad mansions, antiques dealers, etc.

PM After lunch back at our hotel free afternoon to enjoy the pool, have a massage, or just do nothing.

Day 10

AM Depart by road (4.5h) towards the forested hills of the Western Ghats. The drive through Tamil Nadu's countryside is very scenic and we shall have opportunities to stop to witness and photograph various agricultural activities.

Rajakkad our lovely boutique hotel (**2 nights**) is set in a coffee, pepper, and banana estate owned by Robesh Thomas, a

young Keralan gentleman who also acts as Manager. The 7 bedroom building itself was known as Pallam Palace, a 18th Keralan teak mansion, now owned by the British Fry



family of Fry's chocolate fame. It was dismantled, transported, and reassembled on the Tamil Nadu side of the State border. Everything about the building is curated and it has been featured in House & Garden, Traveller Magazine, Financial Times, Sunday Telegraph to name a few. At 1,000m altitude it is beautifully cool and isolated. All the food served at Rajakkad comes from the immediate locality.

PM After lunch and settling in we shall stroll around the estate looking at what they grow and visit the local village where the agricultural workers live. The birdlife and the morning chorus around the property are second to none.

Day 11

Morning walk (3h+) along paths through plantations and pockets of forest spotting for fauna and flora. Our goal is an exposed rock offering wonderful views of valleys and peaks.

After lunch back at Rajakkad time to relax and enjoy one's peaceful plantation surroundings.



Day 12

Morning drive (3.5h) to Madurai Airport for an afternoon flight to Chennai. On arrival we transfer to the **Leela Palace Hotel** for **2 nights**. The latter is the newest and by far the best luxury hotel in town, occupying a prime beach and creek location, and very close to the colonial part of the city. Time to settle in and enjoy the property's extensive luxury facilities.

Day 13

AM This morning we explore Colonial Chennai, the erstwhile Madras. The East India Company's Fort St George, the headquarters of the Madras Presidency, twice taken by the French and eventually returned to British control by Robert Clive. It has an interesting museum and the earliest Anglican church east of Suez, full of colonial funerary plaques and sculptures. We also visit St Thomas' Basilica that with the Vatican and Santiago de Compostela are the only 3 churches holding remains of Apostles. St Thomas is believed to have landed in Kerala in 52 AD and have converted people until being murdered in 72 AD just north of Chennai. He is considered India's patron saint. Finally we stroll through the very colourful flower market.

PM Lunch back at the Leela Palace and free afternoon.

Day 14

Transfer to Chennai International Airport for flights home.

