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# Touchdown in Tamil Nadu and the Less Visited Southern India



JANE MUNDY

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"Krishna's butterball," a gigantic boulder sitting on the hilltop that, according to scientists, defies the laws of physics is found at Mamallapuram's heritage site of temples and monuments. Jane Mundy

Mention Southern India and you'll likely think of Goa, but the state of Tamil Nadu has more to offer than its beaches, namely the seaside towns of Mamallapuram and Pondicherry. The capital city of Chennai, known as the Gatekeeper to the south, although not packed with tourist attractions, it's well worth exploring.

I've never been a big fan of temples until visiting the Kapaleeshwarar Temple with Laksmi, a tour guide with Story Tails. I have a smidgeon of understanding Hinduism, India's past and present culture. Laksmi explains, with much amusement, why people smash coconuts and prostrate themselves in prayer. We then visit a priest's home and his altar, the size of a broom closet, lined with images of gods. And his robes suspended on bamboo poles that human hands do not touch, including his.

Both sides of the East Coast Road driving south are lined with garden centres and pet shops and women sweeping the highway at toll booths. It certainly is a land of contrasts: A steel and glass Mercedes showroom is flanked by decrepit tin-roof shacks and we stop for slow moving cows who have the right of way.

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About two hours later is the seaside town of Mamallapuram—say that three times—and home to stone carvings dating back 2,000 years. Before any sightseeing I check into Grande Bay Resort, take a cool dip in the fabulous swimming pool with its peacock mosaic, and for lunch the best Biryhani at its L'Attitude 49, filled with Indian hipsters and extended families from Chennai, here for its famous buffet. Southern cuisine here is mainly seafood, curries made with coconut milk and spiced with masalas from scratch, and many vegetarian dishes, expertly prepared by Chef Dhiraj and almost three dozen kitchen crew. The 43-room resort has a 2:1 guest and staff ratio.

And it's a one-stop-shop for touring. You can rent Royal Enfield motorbikes and a guide, or a self-guided map. Manager Chindi Varadajulu, former owner of Chutney Villa in Vancouver, has arranged an early morning yoga class on the rooftop. A cool breeze drifts in from the sea, a five-minute walk from the resort. She has also arranged a car and guide.

By 9 a.m. Charles and I arrive, along with just a handful of visitors, at Mamallapuram's heritage site of temples and monuments. Here too is "Krishna's butterball", a gigantic boulder sitting on the hilltop that, according to scientists, defies the laws of physics.



A thali meal costs a few hundred rupees. Jane Mundy

Time to break from the heat and lunch at Mamalla Bhavan, worth visiting for the ambience alone. Not much seems to have changed since the restaurant opened in 1959. It's a favourite local eatery mainly for the prices. A thali meal (a platter of various dishes) costs a few hundred rupees and the full vegetarian deal is half that, all sustainably served on a banana leaf and eaten with your fingers.

We stop at a roadside stand for coconut water near the coastal "dead temple", eerily quiet because nobody worships here. It's a monument,

not a temple, because the structure was never consecrated back in the day.

My 3 p.m session with astrologer and Karma Reader Mr. Chellapa has also been arranged through the resort. For 1,500 rupees this young Brahmin priest will analyze your past and predict your future, but first call ahead with your time of birth. Because this is my last incarnation I will have a painless death. Good to know.

Next day is Pondicherry, a former French colony and still a small separate union with its own rules (during my visit there is a liquor prohibition that doesn't apply here). It's still India but cafes sell croissants and yellow colonial buildings line peaceful, wide avenues. The air is fragrant with Neen and Acacia and Palm trees. And here is the famous park where scenes from *The Life of Pi* was filmed.

Speaking of films, I watch a bizarre video at the Auroville Visitor's Centre about Matrimandir— built in 1968 by an experimental utopian community— before traipsing a long road to glimpse the golden dome from a wire fence (tourists aren't allowed inside). "The City of Dawn" still attracts people worldwide who are "dedicated to peace, sustainability and divine consciousness." Scientists come here to share Indian knowledge and technology: Auroville also has organic farms and many sustainable projects such as alterative energy systems. Among its ancient sites more than 40 practicing architects reside. Amazing Auroville. In fact, my entire trip is amazing.

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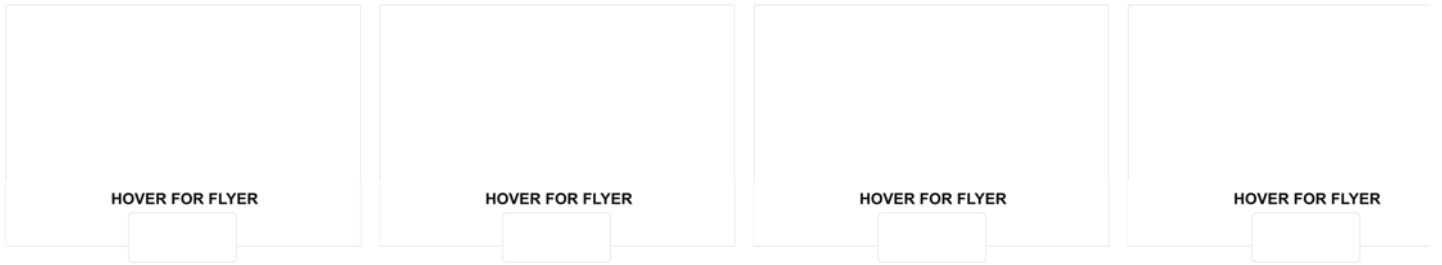
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