

DAY1 – Arrive Chennai & transfer to hotel

Welcome to India! Arrive in cosmopolitan Chennai on the Bay of Bengal, gateway to South India; transfer to the hotel. Time to rest, relax and acclimate to your new time zone or venture out to get acquainted with some of the city's extraordinary sights and the lively shops selling vibrant handmade silk sarees

Overnight: Chennai

DAY2 – Chennai sightseeings



This morning you will visit **Government Museum, also known as Madras Museum**, Founded in 1851, it exhibits various specimens pertaining to zoology, botany, anthropology and geology. The museum has a fine archaeological section representing all the major south Indian periods including Chola, Vijayangar, Hoysla and Chalukyas. The bronze image of Ardhnariswara (Shiva and Parvathy) is an eye-catching one. The museum also has separate sections for philately and children. It also houses a good ethnology collection. Informative lectures and film shows are conducted occasionally. The museum has a well-stocked library.

Your first stop is **Fort St. George**, built by the British as their stronghold, but looking more like a complex of handsome colonial mansions. The fort was the first structure in Madras town and the first territorial possession of the British in India. Its 20-foot walls still stand in the city, encircling India's largest **Anglican Church, St. Mary's, and the Fort St. George Museum**. Today the fort also houses the Tamil Nadu Government Secretariat and the Legislative Assembly. Continue to St. Mary's Church, constructed with thick walls and a strong vaulted roof to withstand the city's many sieges. Its distinctly English style has allowed for concessions to the climate, with windows and doorways open to the breeze.

After lunch, a scenic drive along the coast takes you to **Marina Beach**, a surprising combination of colonial buildings, churches, and monuments accented by the natural beauty of endless skies and sea.

The shore road takes you to the **Basilica of San Thome, a neo-Gothic church** with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, built on the site of earlier churches possibly erected by Nestorian Christians from Persia during the 10th century. It is said to house the remains of St. Thomas, the apostle. Doubting Thomas is believed to have come to India in AD52, lived and preached in Mylapore. Inside the church, in Indian style, Jesus sits on a lotus, surrounded by peacocks.



Visit the celebrated Kapaleeshwarar Temple. Seventh century Tamil poet-saints sang the praises of the celebrated Kapaleeswara Temple; the present structure, dedicated to Lord Shiva, probably dates from the 16th century. The huge tower is covered with a multitude of brightly coloured plaster figures, and temple itself is filled with devotees coming to worship. Prayers are said, blessings are given, and shrines of the various gods are adorned with marigolds and anointed with water and ghee (clarified butter).

|DAY3 – *Chennai – Kanchipuram - Mahabalipuram*

This morning you will drive out to Kanchipuram, popularly known as "Kanchi" is one of the ancient pilgrim centres of south India famous for its lovely magnificent temples. Here you will visit the Sri Ekambaranathar temple which is a very ancient sacred temple of worship and is the largest temple in the town of Kanchipuram. You will also visit The Kailasanath temple which is the oldest temple of Kanchipuram. This temple contains the family of Lord Shiva, the Lord himself, his wife Goddess Parvati and his sons Ganesha and his brother Kartikeya. 58 shrines are in and outside the temple.

As you drive along the streets of the city, view colorful displays of sarees waving in the breeze, woven on hand looms by artisans throughout the city out of dazzling bright silks, embellished with golden threads. On your exclusive visit to a traditional silk weaving factory, meet with some of the artisans and learn how to drape and wear a sari.



Afterward, on to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mahabalipuram, an ancient archaeological wonder rising on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Bay of Bengal. Once a major seaport, these magnificent temples, and carvings are remarkable examples of exquisite architecture, illustrating tales from mythology and highlighting the development of the Dravidian temple style. Spend your evening at leisure

DAY4 – Mahabalipuram sightseeings

Later today you will explore the stunning archaeological remains of Mamallapuram. The importance of this site was acknowledged in 1995, when Mamallapuram was granted World Heritage Site status by UNESCO. The monuments are of four types, open-air bas-reliefs, temples, man-made caves and monolithic rathas literally "chariots" carved in situ from single boulders. Begin with the piece de resistance, Arjuna's Penance (also called the Descent of the Ganges, India's holy river) the world's largest bas-relief at 88 feet long and 30 feet high and one of the great masterpieces of Indian art.



Continue to the Shore Temple which dates back from the early 8th century, it is considered to be the earliest stone temple in south India. The mandapas are shallow, pillared halls carved out of the rocky hillside. The Pancha Pandava rathas are a remarkable group of monoliths five separate freestanding sculptures, imitating in granite temple structures that were originally built of wood. They are named for the five brothers who are among the main characters in the Mahabharata. A life-sized carved elephant stands nearby.

DAY5 – Transfer to Pondicherry enroute Auroville

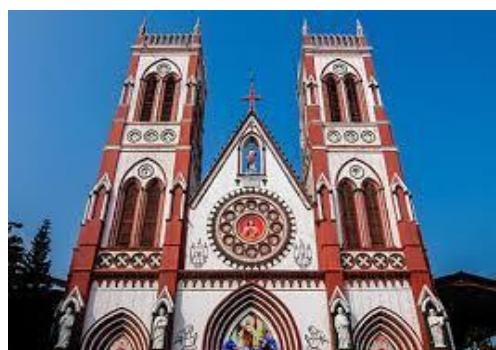
After your tour you will depart for Pondicherry, stopping en route to visit Auroville which was envisioned as a Universal Town, where people from different nationalities, faiths and beliefs, can live in peace and harmony. The construction of this 'universal town' was started in 1968 under the guidance of The Mother, a Paris-born painter musician who became Sri Aurobindo's disciple and close companion from 1924 till his death in 1950. The development of this utopia is still in progress.

Arrive into Pondicherry. The township of Pondicherry is planned on a grid system, which is to say that the roads meet each other at right angles. On the seaward side is the long Petit Canal which divides the town so that the French township is on the side facing the sea and the predominantly Indian/Tamil one on the other.



Explore the French quarters of the town. The French ruled this territory for 300 years, and today, it stands as a living monument of the French culture in India. Pondicherry traces its origin to Saint Agasthya, the revered sage of the south. Excavations near Pondicherry reveal that a Roman settlement existed here, 2000 years ago.

DAY6 – Pondicherry sightseeings



Today you visit the **Shri Aurobindo Ashram**, Shri Aurobindo, the great seer, poet and prophet of the twentieth century, made Pondicherry his home from 1910 till his death in 1950. His vision and ideals continue to draw people from all over the world.

Continue to The **Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, constructed in Gothic style, is a highly revered religious destination in Pondicherry. This gigantic church is one of the most attractive churches in Pondicherry and is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of

Jesus. It is noted for its Gothic architecture, stained glass corridors and panels depicting incidents from the life of Jesus Christ. Within the church you will see Glass pictures of 28 saints who were related to the devotion of Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The **Pondicherry Museum** houses some of the superb collections of sculpture which has an excellent gallery with sculptures and has the remains of archaeological findings from the Arikamedu Roman settlement. There is also a very good collection of snail shells, bronze sculptures of god and goddesses, a variety of temple lamps, handicrafts and art and some pieces of Chola and Pallava art from Pondicherry and Karaikal are displayed in the sculpture gallery.

DAY7 – *Pondicherry to Tanjore*

Today you will proceed towards Thanjavur (Tanjore) stopping en route to visit the Thillai **Natrajah Temple at Chidambaram**. This is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva located in the heart of the temple town of Chidambaram. Chidambaram is one of the five holiest Shiva temples, each of which represents one of the five natural elements, Aether, Earth, Fire, Water and wind. Chidambaram represent Aether.



Afterwards you will continue to **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** and visit the temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Chola emperor Rajendra I (1012-1044) built this Gangaikondacholapuram temple dedicated to Lord Shiva with an imposing gopuram that can be seen miles around. It is a replica of the Brihadeeswara temple at Thanjavur built by his father. There are many beautiful sculptures on the walls of the temple and its enclosures. It was built in commemoration of his victory over the kingdom abutting the Ganges.

A large tank was built at this site and filled with water brought from the sacred River Ganga in north India, hence Raja Raja also assumed the name Gangai Konda Cholan. There is a huge Nandi in front of the temple made of brick and mortar, a lion-faced well with yawning mouth through which a flight of steps lead to the water beneath and gigantic dwarapalakas (gate-keepers) are the other thrilling features of this temple.



You will continue through the temple town of Kumbakonam to Darusaram where you will visit **the Airavatesvara Temple**. This temple is a storehouse of art and architecture and has some exquisite stone carvings. The main deity's consort Periya Nayaki Amman temple is situated adjacent to Airavateswarar temple. The Airavatesvara temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Shiva here is known as Airavatesvara, because he was worshipped at this temple by Airavat, the white elephant of the king of the gods, Indra. Legend has it that Airavata, while suffering from a change of colour curse from Sage Durvasa, had its colours restored by bathing in the sacred waters of this temple.

After your visit you will continue to Tanjore or Thanjavur, also known as the "Rice bowl of Tamil Nadu". Thanjavur was the cultural capital of the country in 1790. Thanjavur gained prominence during the period of Chola Kings, who made it as their capital.

DAY8 – *Tanjore sightseeings*



Your touring of Thanjavur includes a visit to the **Brihadeeswarar Temple**, also known as Rajarajeswaram and is considered as one of the greatest glories of Indian architecture. Constructed completely out of granite it reflects the power of its creator, Raja Raja Chola I. The temple is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Great Living Chola Temples.

Your exploration of the town includes a visit to the **Thanjavur Palace, Museum**, Art Gallery and Library. The Maratha and the Nayaks of Madurai built this vast labyrinthine building in the 16th century. Many sections of this palace are in ruins due to neglect. The evidence of its original splendour can be seen at its ornate Durbar hall. The Royal Museum has a collection of royal memorabilia dating back to the 19th century. Within the museum there is a gallery with a representative collection of stone sculpture from the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Nayaka periods. Another gallery contains samples of the characteristic glass paintings of Tanjore. There are two principal traditions in this style of painting in South India, especially in Thanjavur. Every Hindu home is supposed to have a prayer room, where the family deity is installed after the house is built. These household images of gods and goddesses are in bronze, silver or clay and painted pictures. The paintings are done on wood, using a variety of colours, and to enhance the pictures, details of jewelry and clothing are added by attaching gold leaf, paper, semi-precious and precious gems. This museum is however best known for its outstanding collection of bronze sculpture collection, of rare artistic quality. The Kalyanasundara Murti, the iconographical depiction of the marriage of the Shiva and Parvati.



The **Saraswathy Mahal Library** established around 1700 has a compilation of over 30,000 palm leaf and paper manuscripts in Indian and European languages.

DAY9 – *Tanjore to Madurai*

This morning you will depart Thanjavur and proceed to Madurai, stopping en route to visit **the Sri Rangam Ranga Natha Temple**, which lies on an island, enclosed by the Kaveri River and Kollidam River. Lord Vishnu is enshrined as Ranganatha - the reclining position of Lord Vishnu over the Shesha Nag (serpent Adisesha). It is believed that this is the form in which Lord Mahavishnu is open to listening to all of his devotee's woes and blesses them.

Continue onwards and visit the **Rock Fort Ganapati Temple** also known as Ucchi Pillayar koil which stands 83m tall perched atop the rock. The temple is mystic in its nature with its awe-inspiring



rock architecture. The temple complex is a collection of three temples - the Manikka Vinayaka temple at the foot of the hill, the Uchhi Pillayar Kovil, a Ganesh Temple at the top of the hill and the Taayumaanava Kovil, a Shiva Temple on the hill. You would need to climb up the 437 steps cut into the stone to reach the temple.

Your travels take you to ***Chettinad, land of the Chettiar***, a community that dates back to the Chola period making its fortunes as money lenders, merchants and jewelry dealers. Here, see lavish palaces and mansions that reflect the opulence of a bygone era. Also known for its food and Master Chefs, delight in a distinctive traditional lunch of local favorites.

Arrive Madurai, often referred to the 'City of Nectar', 'Temple City' or 'City of four junctions' Madurai is among the oldest continuously inhabited cities. Madurai was the capital city of ancient Southern civilization and its heritage goes back to 2500 years. Madurai is built around the Meenakshi Sundareswar Temple. Concentric rectangular streets surround the temple, symbolizing the structure of the cosmos. The entire city is laid out in the shape of a lotus. Some of these rectangular streets are named after Tamil months. The six major rectangular streets around Meenakshi temple are Chittirai, Aadi, Aavani Moola, Maasi, Maarat and Veli streets.



Arrive and A visit to the ***Gandhi Museum*** follows with an opportunity to learn about this remarkable man lovingly called the "Father of the Nation" instrumental in India's fight for independence.

This evening you will witness the wondrous ceremony at the Meenakshi Temple, which is performed at 9.15 every night. Nagaswaram

players serenade the deities with melodious music for the traditional ceremony where Sundareswarar goes to rest beside Meenakshi. Another mystical sight is the mysterious labyrinth corridors of the temple, which are swathed by the gently lit lamps.

DAY10 – Madurai Sightseeings

Don't miss this morning's *optional*/Vanakkam (means welcome in Tamil language) private interactive walking tour of Madurai! At the first light of dawn, walk the quiet streets as the city awakens. Observe first-hand how everyday life begins in this Indian city from prayer rituals at the temple to market shopping -- truly a total immersion into the culture.

Early this morning you will visit the ***Meenakshi Temple*** again. The temple is a complex of many deities. The Shiva shrine lies at the centre of the complex, suggesting that the ritual dominance of the goddess developed later. Outside the Shrine, lies huge sculpture of Ganesh carved of single stone and there is a shrine for a giant Ganesh temple, called the Mukuruny Vinayakar. This deity is believed to have been found during an excavation process to dig the temple lake. The Meenkashi shrine is on the left of the Shiva shrine and is of sculpturally less valuable than the Shiva shrine.

visit the **Thirumalai Nayak Palace**, which was built in 1636 by King Thirumalai Nayak



with the help of an Italian Architect and is a classic fusion of Dravidian, Islamic and European styles. The building that we see today was the main Palace where the King lived. The original Palace Complex was four times bigger than the present structure. The courtyard and the dancing hall are the major center of attractions of the palace. North East of Madurai stands a celebrated Vishnu Temple dedicated to Lord Alagar.

The temple is situated on a hill amidst panoramic surroundings. The shrine is known as Alagar Kovil and the hill as Solaimalai. The temple also contains some beautiful carvings. Palamudirsolai, one of the six abodes of Lord Subramaniya is located atop the Hill.

Shop at the bargain-filled bazaars bursting with treasures and jewelry shops galore. Later visit a local dance school practicing Bharatnatyam. Meet with students to learn more about the dance and attend a performance

DAY11 – Madurai to Thekkadu

departing for to Thekkadu - the heart of 'God's own country' and home to India's largest wildlife sanctuary. The sanctuary is spread over an area of 777 sq. km and in the centre of the reserve is an artificial lake, which covers 25 Sq. kms which is an important source of water for the many wild animals. Thekkadu is a paradise on earth for nature lovers. With its vast and bountiful treasures of tropical flora and fauna it is the ultimate reservoir for many an endangered species. The forests around the lake were declared as a reserved area in 1899 and its geomorphology, diversity of wildlife and scenic beauty attracts visitors from all over the world.

Arrive Thekkadu and visit a **Spice Plantation**.

Columbus went west to find the sea route to the land of spices but found America. Vascodagama, the Arabs and other explorers and traders came to India for the same purpose and stumbled on the spice rich south western tip of India, now known as Kerala. Spices have always been an important part of life in Kerala. Here the masters of Ayurveda, the science of life, discovered the use of spices for medicinal purposes. Spices also play an important role in the Kerala cuisine, non-ayurvedic medicine and cosmetics. Periyar due to its location in the lower mountains around 1000 metres above sea level, is blessed with numerous types of spices. Consequently, the spice plantation tour is in one of the most important activities outside the reserve that a visitor can engage in. It is an opportunity to see why the Kerala cuisine is so different from most of the other Indian cuisines. The tour gives you a chance to enjoy cardamom, pepper, clove, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla and many other varieties of spices and medicinal plants.



DAY12 – Thekkady sightseeings

An enchanting way to explore the Periyar Tiger Reserve is by boat. As the boat glides upon the still dark waters of the lake, visitors can feast their eyes upon the vibrant green of the surrounding foliage. As the boat brushes gently against branches of trees, one is transported back to the times when this was the only means of transport. This incredible experience is further enhanced by rare sights of animal's drinking water at the edge of the lake. The best time to sight the animals is in the wee hours of the morning, when the day has just broken.



Begin the day with a ***nature walk inside the National Park***. Pass through evergreen and deciduous forests accompanied by your local guide, who informs you about the local flora. A highlight of the day is a scenic Jeep ride to Ottakathalamedu, 1300 meters above sea level, for panoramic views of Thekkady. Afterward, a boat ride on the picturesque lake. Tonight, gather for dinner at the hotel

In the evening, join the *optional* Kalaripayattu Martial Art Show with dinner. Kalaripayattu, one of the oldest fighting styles in the world, is believed to have been adapted from various martial art forms like karate, kung-fu, and judo

DAY13 – Thekkady to Allepy



Depart and travel to Alappuzha (previously called Alleppey), nestled in the midst of a thick tangle of lush tropical waterways. Upon arrival you will board your houseboat. The Backwater Cruise through Alleppey which is also known as the, "Venice of the East". It has a large network of canals that meander through the town. The term "backwaters" actually refers to the extensive network of rivers, lakes, canals and lagoons that lace together the coast and interior south of

Kochi. For centuries the backwaters have acted as a vital waterway for the transportation of goods, people and their produce. This is often the only link between isolated villages and crowded towns. In Kerala, the total expanse of backwater stretches over 1500 kms, and Alleppey forms the main part of this network. Even today, coconut, pepper, coir (coconut husks), rice and other goods are carried along the waterways in traditional longboats called kettuvallam.

Upon arrival you will board your houseboat for an idyllic trip through the majestic forests and palm-shaded backwaters of the city and surroundings. As you glide in your "Kettuvallam" (Houseboat) you will travel through the enchanting backwaters of Alleppey. Pass through shimmering waterways lined with



dense tropical vegetation, and observe rural Keralan lifestyles that you would never see from the road. Views range from narrow canals walled in with thick greenery to open vistas of brilliant green paddy fields. Papaya, mango, jackfruit and cassava grow along the palm-lined banks. Along the way you will see the coconut harvesting and coir factories that make up the main industry of Kerala. Churches, mosques and temples can be glimpsed among the trees, and you might catch the blue flash of a kingfisher, flocks of ducks swimming around the banks or maybe get a fleeting glimpse of a green parakeet. You will observe rural life as you pass villagers bathing and wash their clothes, and sometimes their buffalos, at the water's edge. Time seems to come to a standstill as the sparkling water and caressing cool breeze relaxes you completely.

DAY14 – Alleppy to Cochi

After breakfast onboard your houseboat you will drive to Cochin. A trading port since at least Roman times, Cochin is on the main route between Europe and China. With a relaxed seaport lifestyle, it has changed little over the centuries. Guests experience the bustle of commerce in and about the city's go downs (warehouses) and open courtyards heaped with betel nut, ginger, peppercorns and hanks of coir (coconut husks). The air is filled with the scent of exotic spices and the shouts of vendors pushing heavy carts. It is easy to forget that one



is in the 21st century.

Arrive and proceed to your hotel and the rest of the day is at leisure.

DAY15 – Cochi sightseeings

Most of Cochin's historic buildings are in Fort Cochin, constructed by Portugal's Alfonzo de Albuquerque in 1500. Albuquerque arrived with half a dozen ships bearing settlers and five friars and built the first European church in India, ***St. Francis Church***. The simply styled building is enhanced only by the beautiful floor tiles that line the main aisle. A holdover from colonial days is the continued use of punkahs, large swinging cloth fans suspended above the congregation and manually operated from outside the church. On the same square and in striking contrast, is the flamboyant decor of the ***20th century Santa Cruz Cathedral*** in an Indo-Romano-Rococo style.



The large, graceful ***Chinese fishing nets that line the shore of Fort Cochin*** are probably the single most familiar image of Kerala. Chinese Fishing Nets were actually introduced by traders from the court of Kublai Khan. They cantilever over the harbour, and operate by a system of weights and levers. The nets, on wooden frames, are raised periodically to check the catch.



Visit the ***Pardesi Synagogue***, a tiny but delightful structure built in 1568. They then

continue to **Mattancherry or "Dutch Palace"** which houses a remarkable series of murals rich in color and with painstaking detail. In the royal bedroom alone are 45 paintings illustrating the Ramayana every inch of space covered with rich colour and painstaking detail. There is also an interesting collection of Dutch maps of old Kochi, coronation robes belonging to the maharajas, royal palanquins, weapons and furniture. The surrounding area still called Jew Town. Spend time is spent in exploring a fascinating mix of so called antique shops, warehouses, and spice auction rooms. Signs for N.X. Jacob's tailor shop, and the offices of J.E. Cohen serve as reminders of a once thriving community now consisting of about seven families. One tradition states that the first Jews settled near Cochin in 587 BC, after fleeing the occupation of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Another legend claims that they came much earlier in the 11th century BC, as part of a trading fleet sent by King Solomon. The earliest concrete evidence of their presence is a copper inscription dated AD 388. Whatever the truth of their arrival, they became and remained respected members of Kerala society.

Late this afternoon you will proceed to a local theatre and witness a Kathakali dance performance, one of the oldest theatre forms in the world. It originated in the area of southwestern India now known as the state of Kerala. It is a well-developed dance-drama, where the actors depict characters from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Kathakali dance performance is very dramatic and is enacted with elaborate masks and costumes. Kathakali recitals are emotive and narrative, and combine dance with dialogue to bring myth and legend to life in the temple courtyards of Kerala. A traditional Kathakali performance begins in the evening and continues throughout the night, culminating at the auspicious hour of dawn, when Good finally conquers Evil. Today, however, this dance performance has been modified for the stage and the audience can witness this ritualistic theatre experience in the comfort of a plush auditorium, within the span of a couple of hours.

