

TOURISM UPDATE



PHOTOS BY AJAY SOOD (TRAVELURE)

🔍 **Rock Art:** Elaborate carvings decorate all the five Rathas in Mahabalipuram. A close view of one of them.

🔍 **Steady Faith:** Krishna's Butterball is a huge rock that stands in gravity defying stillness, come rain or storm.

🔍 **Fierce Sentinel:** A lion carving guarding the precincts of the Shore Temple has withstood the ravages of time in the line of duty.

Heritage on Beach

A perfect year end getaway—sun, sand, history, culture and much more.

BY BINITA SINGH

If in the middle of cold foggy winter a beach holiday beckons tantalisingly, worry not. Just head to Mamallapuram, better known as Mahabalipuram. This ancient seaport town offers much more than a perfect soak in the sun. The beachside city is a curious potpourri of art, culture, history, heritage, architecture, modernity and much else and an archeological treasure trove with its famous group of monuments listed among UNESCO's World Heritage Sites. Yes, Mahabalipuram has much to offer to the world traveller, the reason why it has earned the sobriquet of a tourist town.

The tiny beachside getaway situated at a convenient distance of approximately 60 km from the thriving state capital of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, is just a 45 minutes to one-hour drive down the East Coast Road (ECR). As you cruise along this one-lane well maintained toll road, one of the most scenic coastal



Sood (Travelure)

drives in India, the Bay of Bengal plays hide and seek throughout the way. The road has many pit stops as is the wont in any such highway where roadside shacks and shanties come up overnight to cater to every need of the world traveller. Mahabalipuram is the first stop on the 690 km long state highway that connects Chennai with Mahabalipuram, Pondicherry, Chidambaram, Tranquebar, Karikal, Nagore, Nagapattinam, Ramnanathapuram (near Rameshwaram) and Tuticorin. For experiential travellers and inbound tourists, the East Coast Road is one of the highs in

their India trip for the delightful drive it offers. An unfettered view of the deep blue Bay of Bengal on one side and greenery, backwaters, forests, temples, mosques and heritage sites dotting the other side, make it an explorative journey.

A must-visit destination on the India itinerary of foreign tourists, the heritage and beach of Mahabalipuram are now drawing the domestic travellers too. Weekend revellers from the city and the corporate crowd often drive down for a picnic by the shore or just to spend the day on the beach. If you want to avoid the crowds, time your visit for weekdays when the beaches are peaceful and calm. The beach ambience of the seaside heritage destination and the treasure trove of its ancient monuments make Mahabalipuram among the top 10 most visited places by overseas tourists. A visit to India is incomplete unless one has explored the rich past buried in the monuments on Mahabalipuram's shores. If you are holidaying in South India, it makes the perfect last stop on the way back to relax, rewind and rejuvenate, while you explore the wonders hidden beneath its rocks.

The best time to visit Mahabalipuram is now—December until March. The weather is dry and cool, the rest of India is freezing and of course it is that time of the year again! You need to take a break, shore up your strengths, reflect on the year gone by, perhaps make a few resolutions for the New Year and in general, be merry! If you want to enjoy some solitude, go alone backpacking, Mamallapuram has a thriving backpacker scene. If it is time with the family that you seek, then again, you can take your pick from a number of hotels and beach resorts that suit all budgets. The best way to explore this seaside paradise is of course on foot. However, you can always rent a bicycle to save time. Whatever your choice, the first thing that strikes you in Mamallapuram is the majesty of the rocks, the pristine sands, the clear blue sky, the deep blue ocean and the vast stillness of space. And all that within the small periphery of Mahabalipuram! Take a 360 degree view. Yes, it's true. As far as your eye can see it's a clear view of unobstructed skyline and Bay of Bengal. No manmade creation sullies the view.

A lone lighthouse sits sentinel quietly on a hill watching over the city and its ancient temples. A great vantage point offering unobstructed view of the vast vista across the sea, head out here for the first look of the ocean paradise and file it forever into your memory book and cameras. Your curiosity must be aroused by now at the sight

FOUR KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. CAVE OF HISTORY



Varaha or Vishnu Cave, part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in Mahabalipuram, is a delightful pictorial story.

2. GUIDING LIGHT



Built in 1900, this lighthouse, promoted under the Lighthouse Tourism concept, is famous for its views.

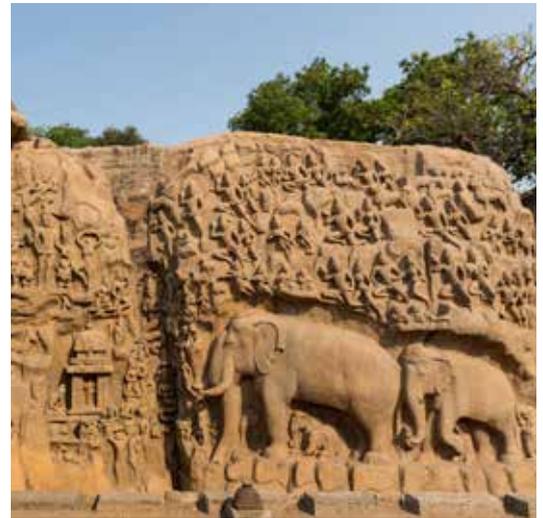
3. SEA & SALT



In sunlight they gleam like jewels and in moonlight they take on an ethereal aura, the salt pans beckon!

4. TEMPLE DECOR

The minutely carved designs on the Five Rathas mesmerise visitors and artists alike.



Penitent Beauty: In a giant rock canvas, about 20 feet high and 80 feet long, is carved the story of Arjuna's penance.

of the many rock structures around and some submerged ones that became visible to the human eye post the 2004 tsunami. Our exploration of Mahabalipuram must start with the heritage sculptures, the world renowned 7th to 9th century stone carvings. An exploration of Mahabalipuram is a journey back in time. It is a lesson in history and architecture, culture and art and their confluence. The second capital of the Pallava kings of Kanchipuram, the boulder strewn landscape of this tiny seaside village is unique for the rock cut art on its pristine miles long beach. The sculptures depict day to day life and can be divided into four categories—bas-relief, structured temples, manmade caves and *Rathas* (chariots carved from single boulders). Today, the once famous harbour town of the Pallava kings is known more for their architectural acumen manifest in its rock sanctuaries and temple carvings.

Learn about the history of the Pallavas that had spread its influence far down to Cambodia, Annam, Java, etc. and the history of South East Asia, where the influence of Pallava sculptures is found. The famous wrestler King Narasimhavarman I Mamalla, after whom the port town was named Mamallapuram and his successor Rajasimhavarman built the beautiful temples during their reign. The historical findings regarding the period are fascinating with different historians presenting a different theory of influences that shaped Mahabalipuram's heritage. Whatever the historical perspective, the fact remains that today this heritage town presents itself as an intriguing destination for each and every visitor. The Five *Rathas* are by far the most

▶ **Delight House:** The old lighthouse built in the 7th century is a masterpiece.

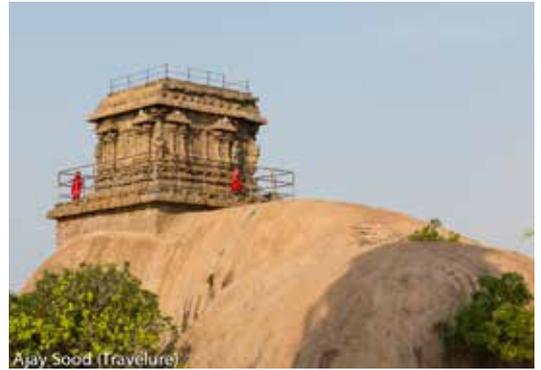


Ajay Sood (Travelure)

▶ **On the Seashore:** Literally, stands Shore Temple, a masterful architectural wonder and the UNESCO World Heritage Site, that has stood a silent witness to the shifting sands of time.

famous of the many rock arts here. Imposing in their grandeur, intriguing in their concept and amazing in their art, the *rathas* defy disbelief. Representing the five Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi from the epic, *The Mahabharata*, all are carved from a single boulder. Explore the intricate carvings and the mythological tales that add intrigue to the many mysterious characters depicted. Marvel at the artisans' skills from an era eons ago and wonder at the purpose of these grandiose pieces of art. Can any of our contemporary installations stand comparison with these larger than life art pieces?

Head to Arjuna's Penance next. It is like *Amar Chitra Katha*, the famous children's classic comics, illustrated in rock art. The story of Arjuna's penance or as some historians believe, Bhagirath's penance to bring river Ganges to earth is depicted in bas relief. It is like watching a silent movie or still art. The surrounding scenes present everyday life depictive of the times. This is what makes Mahabalipuram rock art so unique. It is resonant of the cultural influences that it has absorbed over the times and disseminates it through the various sculptures that depict that time. The *mandapas* or the rock sanctuaries are pillared halls on the main hill in Mahabalipuram. The 10 pavilions were designed as temples with a sanctum and house exquisite sculptures of gods and goddesses. Explore them all, especially the *mandapas* of Varaha (Vishnu), the unfinished *mandapa* of the five Pandavas, the *mandapa* of Krishna and the *mandapa* of Mahishasuramardini. In the latter, scenes from the *Puranas* decorate the walls and one of the finest sculptures of Goddess Durga is found here. Above it are the ruins of the 8th-century Olakkannesvara Temple; from this vantage point you can get a spectacular view of Mamallapuram. Do also take a look at the gravity defying Krishna's Butterball. Dare to sit under its shade if you may! Shore Temple, by far is the most famous heritage structure of Mahabalipuram. Perched atop a rocky outpost with the deep blue ocean as its natural backdrop, it is an architectural masterpiece representing the highest peak of the Pallavas' artistry. Built in granite rock, the work on the temple had begun in the 8th century and has stood a mute testimony to passing ages for



Ajay Sood (Travelure)



▶ **King's Chariot:** Relics of sublime beauty crafted by man.

the more than 1,400 years. Unlike the *rathas* and the *mandapas*, the Shore Temple is the earliest example of a stone built temple and has not been carved out of rock. The design of the temple is such that it catches the first rays of the rising sun as the main shrine faces the east, but at night it illuminates the dark waters behind it with dazzling lights. It is for this unusual architecture that it has been famously called a landmark by day and a beacon by night. Another unusual fact about the Shore Temple is that it is the abode of both Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, a rare occurrence in temple architecture. The amount of history, culture and architecture that Mahabalipuram packs does whip up appetites of another kind. You can try authentic seafood cuisine at some of the great cafes here. For variety, visit the Crocodile Bank and immerse in the wildlife ambience of breeding birds and Olive Ridely sea turtles or drive down to Vallam Reserve Forest a little distance from Chengalpattu, where there are birds, beasts, reptiles and amphibians. You can go boating at Muttukadu Lake, a scenic spot near Mahabalipuram or go shopping for handicrafts directly from artisans at Dakshinachitra, a craft village on East Coast Road.

PS: Time permitting, do take a trip down to Kanchipuram. It forms a heritage triangle with Chennai and Mahabalipuram and you may just find the perfect Kanchipuram silk sari—the famed heirloom collection—right from the weavers! ■