

TOURISM UPDATE

PONDICHERRY



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▲ **Cultural Vanguard:** Mahatma Gandhi's four-metre statue situated along the Promenade is a cultural hotspot in Pondicherry.

◀ **Cafe Class:** The many cafeterias and pubs dotting Pondicherry add a quaint French village charm to its exoticism.

▼ **Soul Search:** Step out on the beach at dawn to commune with Nature and enjoy the pristine beauty of Pondicherry. Promenade Beach is perfect for these morning walks.

India's French Coast!

Pondicherry with its French heritage and still unexploited beaches is a traveller's delight. **BY SANGITA THAKUR VARMA**



The French Riviera of the East retains its flavour. There's a distinct yet mellow air that blows here gently, slowing life to a leisurely pace. The moment you disembark from your taxi, Pondicherry, the capital city of Puducherry, strikes a different chord—but not a discordant note. You can hear the *Koel* (the State Bird) sing in the arborescences of the French Quarter, the gentle lap of the sea, strains of a piano wafting from one of the arched doorways of the colonial style villas on Rue Romain Rolland.

It takes around three hours by road to reach the town from Chennai. The picturesque drive with sand dunes flanking one side and the unfet-

tered view of the sea on the other as you drive down the East Coast Road (ECR) is but a trailer to the breathtaking allure of an unforgettable sojourn. There are other routes like the National Highway 45 or the Grand Southern Trunk (GST) or the drive from Bangalore. You may even take a flight to Pondicherry. But then you will miss the midway stop at Mahabalipuram for a visit to the famous temples and the priceless drive down the ECR.

What makes Puducherry so distinct is the coexistence of a multicultural cosmopolitan core, which one finds somewhat surprising given the fact that it is tucked far away from mainstream India in the eastern seaboard. But then, Pondicherry was always for the culturally bon vivant, as resident Puducherians will tell you. The population here is a mix of local Tamil folk, the Bengalis and the Oriyas who came in with Aurobindo Ghosh when he set up his famous ashram in 1926, French expatriates (who chose to stay behind even after 'Pondy' became a Union Territory more than 50 years ago) and the Europeans and Americans who form two-thirds of the residents of Auroville.

There is so much to explore in this city that you are tempted to extend your few days by another few. There is also a sense of calm, a peace that surrounds you; and for the time you are there, you are best advised to renounce all worldly connections (switch off your mobile, and tuck that iPad out of sight), and throw your cares to the winds as you rent a bike (the best mode of transport to wind down the tree-lined boulevards and the seafront promenade) to explore the many delights of this quaint city.

The town architecture leaves one wonder-struck as no other city in India displays such a distinct style. Go to the French Quarter which still retains its Gallic aura in its neat grid structure. Little seems to have changed here with streets retaining their original French names like St Martin, Rue Suffren and colonial bungalows painted in mellow hues of pink and yellow with bright bursts of bougainvillea hanging over their high compound walls and arched doorways. Rows upon rows of neat houses with colonnaded porticos, you are struck by the symmetry and simplicity of design. The French Quarter seems to transport you to some provincial village in France.

There are several architectural marvels in Pondicherry that appear to belong to another era. In fact, the whole ambience of genteel elegance lulls you into feeling as though you have stepped back in time. A visit to the Children's Park with its statue of Marquis Joseph Francois Dupleix is a strong reminder of Puducherry's French occupation. Dupleix was the governor of Puducherry between 1742 and 1754. The sea-facing The Mairie situated on Gaubert Avenue, that today



FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. FRAGRANCE OF FRANCE LINGERS HERE



Romain Rolland Street, named after the French scholar and associate of Mahatma Gandhi.

2. ELEPHANT GODDESS BLESSES THE DEVOUT



Lakshmi, a celebrity, has tourists making a beeline for the Ganesha temple on Manakula Vinayagar Koil Street morning and evening.

3. FRENCH QUARTERS



Take a heritage walk down the wide roads to discover the little nuggets of unique Pondicherry history.

4. VARIED COLLECTION



A shopper's paradise for unusual curios, objects d'art as also some high end brands.

5. CALL OF THE WILD

Nature beckons one to stay and savour its many fascinating treasures. From a leisurely walk down the sea front, picnics in the park to cruises down the sea, Pondicherry offers all.



Play on : Music and dance at dusk mark the perfect end to an eventful day exploring the city. Put up your feet, close your eyes and let go, or take to the dance floor with your partner.

is the office of the Puducherry municipality, is strongly reminiscent of French architecture. Every year on July 14, Puducherry celebrates Bastille Day to commemorate the French martyrs of the First World War. A memorial to them on Gaubert Avenue is beautifully decorated and illuminated on the day to pay homage to these bravehearts.

The French Consulate General with its 18th century charm is the only diplomatic mission in Puducherry. Other French influences are apparent in the now defunct 19th century lighthouse that stands on the edge of the sea and the Aayi Mandappam that despite its Tamilian name was actually built in the time of Napoleon III, the emperor of France. The *Raj Niwas* is again a piece of exquisite French architecture that housed the French trading company.

At the Church of Our Lady of the Angels in Dumas Street you can see the rare oil painting of Our Lady of Assumption gifted by Napoleon III. The church is an architectural and historical marvel built in 1855 with its façade facing the sea. Right in front of the church in the middle of a garden stands the tall and imposing marble statue of Joan d' Arc. With her back to the sea and facing the church, she takes your breath away with sheer simplicity of power.

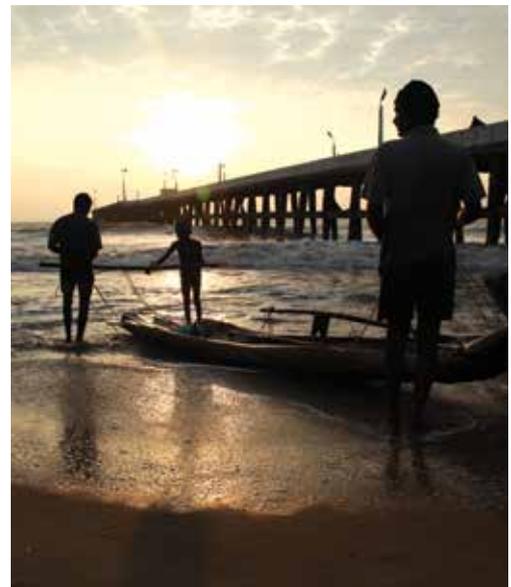
Other must visit French architectural wonders include The French Institute of the Far East situated on Dumas Street, an internationally acclaimed research institute on Indology, history and archeology. Its two buildings stand at the corner of the street. Dine at Hotel de l'Orient built in 1809 on Romain Rolland Street and you can also shop for some curios to take back with you while you learn about its history. Hotel Lagrenee de Meziere, again on Rolland



▲ **Bonding Time:** Visitor centre at the famous Auroville that is home to an international community.

◀ **Window View:** A street named after the French East India Company which was founded in 1664.

▽ **To sea, to sea!** Take a catamaran and sail down to the sea or go on a cruise to enjoy the scenic beauty.



Street, built in 1774, was once a private house. Today, it is a workshop for exquisite embroidery. You can learn the story of the intervening years of Puducherry from the nuns of St Joseph of Cluny. The house was donated to the order some 150 years back.

There are many more such historical nuggets that keep you going back to explore the streets of Pondicherry. The streetscape of the Tamil or the Indian Quarter is one such thing—a direct contrast to the grid like French colonnade houses, the Tamil Quarter or talking street as it is called has intimate continuous wall to wall constructions that are typical of Tamil architecture. While here, visit the Botanical Garden which is at the centre of the old Tamil town. Built in 1826, it stands out from its surroundings given its ornate French landscaped style.

With a coastline of 32 km, Puducherry boasts of some of the best beaches. What adds to the attraction is that they are less commercialised and offer peace and quiet. Head out to the Auroville beach at the break of dawn and join the meditators on the pristine sands. There is the Promenade, the Paradise and the Serenity beach as well if you want to spend your day lazing beside the sea. Or simply stroll along Beach Road one evening and breathe in Pondy air.

A visit to Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville is of course mandatory to understand the unique international community and the blend of yoga and spirituality that drives them. Apart from these, there are several temples, churches and mosques that offer unique architectural insights. For the historically inclined there is the Puducherry Museum on St Louis Street, the Ananda Ranga Pillai Museum. Pillai was the dubash of Dupleix and his diaries are a revelation on the life and times of the 18th century French in India. The Bharathi Memorial Museum and the Bharthidasan Museum offer glimpses of Tamil literature at its best.

If time permits, you can venture a little further and visit Chunnambar Backwater around 8 km from Pondicherry. Sail down the beautiful creek

and pitch a tent for a night out under the beautiful tropical sky. You can even cruise out to the sea and espy some frolicking dolphins as an added bonus or just laze on the boat. You can make arrangements for the cruise at Pondicherry itself.

For those keen on trying the local cuisine, it's as close to authentic French as you can get in India. The town has many Vietnamese restaurants, a relic of its French past, that serve up delicious chicken noodle soup. Try Creole cuisine. Also try a meal at one of the community kitchens at Auroville or the Visitors' Centre while shopping there.

The best time to visit Puducherry is between July and February. So pack your bags this autumn and head for this boulevard town seeped in French nostalgia, tree-lined promenades, pristine beaches with palm trees swaying in the breeze, backwaters, fishing on catamarans, cruise on the sea, fine wine and cuisine, and the thrill and adventure of the unexplored. ■