



Tamil Nadu & Chennai

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Best Places to Eat

- » Any branch of Hotel Saravana Bhavan (p994)
- » Bangala (p1034)
- » Satsanga (p1018)

Best Places to Stay

- » Calve (p1015)
- » Visalam (p1034)
- » 180 McIver (p1051)
- » Carlton Hotel (p1045)

Why Go?

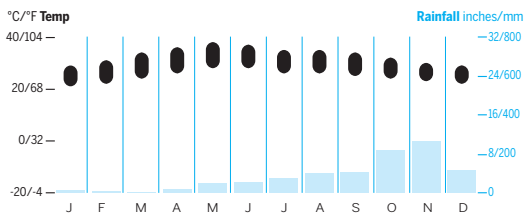
Tamil Nadu is the homeland of one of humanity's living classical civilisations, a people whose culture has grown, but in many ways not fundamentally altered, since the Greeks sacrificed goats to Zeus.

But this state is as dynamic as it is drenched in history. In Tamil Nadu's famous temples, fire-worshipping devotees smear tikka on their brows before heading to IT offices to develop new software applications. Tamil Nadu has one foot in the 21st century and the other in the poetry of one of the oldest literary languages on Earth.

Here you can reach the ends of India, where three oceans mingle. See the tiger-prowled hills of the Nilgiris, the Mother Temple of the triple-breasted, fish-eyed goddess and the Mountain of Fire, where god manifests as a pillar of flame. It's all packed into a state that manages to remain fiercely distinct from the rest of India, while exemplifying her oldest and most adventurous edges.

When to Go

Chennai



Jan Pongal
(harvest festival)
celebrations spill
into the streets.

May Head to
the hill stations
for the summer
'season'.

Nov The full-
moon festival of
lights.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Chennai Airport will be your probable point of entry if you're flying into Tamil Nadu from overseas, although Trichy and Coimbatore have (limited) international services. From inside India, there are domestic airports at Chennai, Trichy, Coimbatore and Madurai; these four cities are also the state's major train junctions.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 72.1 million
- » Area: 130,058 sq km
- » Capital: Chennai (Madras)
- » Main language: Tamil
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹1000, \$\$ ₹1000 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

Top Tip

If you need train tickets in a hurry, the Foreign Tourist Assistance Cell at Chennai Central (p999) is the most helpful and efficient we've ever come across; tickets for booked-up trains anywhere in India seem to become magically available here.

Resources

- » TamilNadu.Com (www.tamilnadu.com) News and directory.
- » Tamil Nadu Forest Department (www.forests.tn.nic.in) National parks, ecotourism and permit information.
- » Tamil Nadu Tourism (www.tamilnadutourism.org)

Food

Tamil Nadu's favourite foods are overwhelmingly vegetarian, with lots of coconut and chilli. No matter where you go you'll find dosas, *idlis* (spongy, round fermented rice cakes) and *vada* (deep-fried lentil-flour doughnuts), all of which are always served with coconut chutney and *sambar* (lentil broth). These will sometimes be your only options, and luckily they're very, very tasty (though you want to eat your *idlis* fresh and warm) – and they're generally vegan friendly, too. *Thalis* – all-you-can-eat meals based around rice, lentil dishes, *rasam* (hot and sour tamarind soup) and chutneys, often served on a banana leaf – are also good, ubiquitous, cheap and filling.

The exception to the all-veg diet is Chettinad food, derived from food traditionally prepared in the southern region around Pudukkottai and Karaikkudi but available at restaurants in most of the bigger towns. Chettinad menus often feature mutton, chicken and fish; it's less fiery and more about the use of fresh spices like cinammon, cumin and star anise. Pepper Chicken is a classic Chettinad dish.

For a state that grows a lot of tea, Tamil Nadu really loves its coffee; filtered coffee (mixed with milk and sugar, of course) is more readily available than tea in many cheap thali joints.

DON'T MISS

Escape from the heat of the plains by taking the **toy train** from Mettapalayam up into the Nilgiri hills; the tracks cut through tropical palms and paddy fields, then through green, monkey-infested jungles, crosses bridges over gushing streams and finally chugs through European-looking forest into the cool of Ooty.

You can't come to Tamil Nadu without admiring its ancient **temples**; see p1023 for a selection with the most stunning architecture, rituals and festivals.

Top State Festivals

- » International Yoga Festival (4-7 Jan, Puducherry, p1015)
- » Chennai Sangamam (mid-Jan, Chennai, p992)
- » Pongal (mid-Jan, statewide, p984) Harvest festival.
- » International Music festival (Jan, Thiruvaiyaru, p1027)
- » Teppam (Float) Festival (Jan/Feb, Madurai, p1037)
- » Natyanjali Dance Festival (Feb/Mar, Chidambaram, p1022)
- » Chithrai Festival (Apr/May, Madurai, p1037)
- » Summer festivals (May-Jun, statewide, p984)
- » Bastille Day (14 Jul, Puducherry, p1015)
- » Karthikai Deepam Festival (Nov/Dec, statewide, p984)
- » Chennai Festival of Music & Dance (mid-Dec–mid-Jan, Chennai, p992)
- » Mamallapuram Dance Festival (Dec-Jan, Mamallapuram, p1006)



Tamil Nadu Highlights

- 1 Climb into the cool of the **Western Ghats** (p1044)
- 2 Spend the night in a Chettiar mansion in **Pudukkottai district** (p1033)
- 3 Watch the sun set over three oceans at once in **Kanyakumari** (p1041)
- 4 See god manifest as a lingam of fire in **Tiruvannamalai** (p1012)
- 5 Explore the Gallic roots of **Puducherry** (Pondicherry; p1014)

History

It's ironic that the bearers of the torch of South Indian identity may have their origins in Punjab and Pakistan. The early Indus civilisations display elements of Dravidian thought, language, culture and art, including a meditating god seated in the lotus position. This may be the world's first depiction of the yogi archetype, who has come to symbolise, for many, Asian spirituality.

The nomadic Aryans drove the Dravidians south around 1500 BC. Here, a classical language and classical civilisations developed, cushioned by geography against North Indian invasion. By 300 BC the region was controlled by three major dynasties – Cholas in the east, Pandyas in the central area and Cheras in the west. This was the classical period of Tamil literature and myth – the Sangam Age – when kingdoms were ruled by feuding poet-kings and romantic epics; a visitor at the time described the Tamils as favouring rose petals over gold.

The Tamils developed their own aesthetic style, constructing huge cities that rivalled population centres in China and Europe, and magnificent steeped temples that wouldn't look out of place in Mayan Central America. Although each kingdom left notable achievements, the Cholas deserve some special mention. This remarkable nation maintained one of the great maritime empires of history, extending its influence to Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia, and spreading Tamil ideas of reincarnation, karma and yogic practice to Southeast Asia. The end result of this cross-pollination was architectural wonders like Angkor Wat, the intellectual gestation of Balinese Hinduism and much of the philosophy associated with classical Buddhism.

Before the Mughals could fully extend their reach to India's tip, in 1640 the British negotiated the use of Madraspatnam (now Chennai) as a trading post. Subsequent interest by the French, Dutch and Danes led to continual conflict and, finally, almost total domination by the British, when the region became known as the Madras Presidency. Small pocketed areas, including Pudukcherry (Pondicherry) and Karaikal, remained under French control.

Many Tamils played a significant part in India's struggle for independence, which was finally won in 1947. In 1956 the Madras Presidency was disbanded and Tamil Nadu was established as an autonomous state.

Dangers & Annoyances

The big draw in Tamil Nadu is the 5000-odd temples, but this is a very religious state, and non-Hindus are generally not allowed inside inner sanctums. This can be frustrating, as large areas of the best temples are essentially inaccessible to many travellers. Even nonresident Indians can be subject to scrutiny, and non-Indian Hindus may have to provide proof of conversion. Temple touts are fairly common and can be a nuisance, but don't dismiss every one as a scammer. There are many excellent guides here and they deserve both your time and rupees; use your best judgement, ask other travellers which guides they'd recommend and be on the lookout for badge-wearing official guides, who tend to be excellent resources.

Don't expect the Hindi slang you picked up in Rishikesh to go over well here. The Tamils are fiercely proud of their language and some consider Hindi to be North Indian cultural imperialism. North Indian tourists

TAMIL NADU FESTIVALS

Pongal is held in mid-January. As the rice boils over the new clay pots, this festival symbolises the prosperity and abundance a fruitful harvest brings. For many, the celebrations begin with temple rituals, followed by family gatherings. Later it's the animals, especially cows, that are honoured for their contribution to the harvest.

Summer festivals are held from May through June throughout the hills, but especially in Ooty and Kodaikanal, where there are boat races on the lake, horse racing (in Ooty), flower shows and music.

Held during full moon in November/December, the **Karthikai Deepam Festival** (Nov/Dec; statewide) is Tamil Nadu's 'festival of lights'. It is celebrated throughout the state with earthenware lamps and firecrackers, but the best place to see it is Tiruvannamalai (see boxed text, p1012), where the legend began.

Many other temple-centred festivals are held in towns around the state; see p982 for a rundown and individual town sections for details.

are often as confused as you are down here; more Tamils speak English than Hindi.

i Information

The state tourism body is **Tamil Nadu Tourism** (www.tamilnadutourism.org), which runs tourist offices of varying degrees of uselessness in most cities and large towns, plus a reliably average chain of hotels. You can also check www.tamilnadu-tourism.com for package-tour options. Accommodation costing more than ₹200 in Tamil Nadu (but not Puducherry) is subject to a government 'luxury' tax – 5% on rooms between ₹200 and ₹500, 10% on rooms between ₹501 and ₹1000, and 12.5% on rooms over ₹1000. There's often an additional 'service tax' at upmarket hotels. Prices throughout this chapter do not include tax, unless stated otherwise.

CHENNAI (MADRAS)

☎044 / POP 6.6 MILLION

Chennai doesn't always make a good first impression. The streets are clogged with traffic, the weather is oppressively hot, the air is heavy with smog and sights of any great interest are thin on the ground.

The city's charm lies in its inhabitants; the enthusiasm of Chennaites for their hometown starts to infect you after a while, and they're friendlier and more down to earth than most big-city dwellers. Chennai is so chilled out you wouldn't even know it's an economic powerhouse, much less a queen of showbiz: India's fourth-largest city is its most humble.

The major transport hub of the region, this 70-sq-km city is a conglomerate of urban villages connected by a maze of roads ruled by hard-line rickshaw drivers. Its central location and excellent plane, train and bus connections actually make it an interesting alternative entry point into India. If you do happen to be caught here between connections, it's certainly worth your while poking around the markets of George Town or taking a sunset stroll along pretty Marina Beach.

Bordered on the east by the Bay of Bengal, Chennai is a sprawling combination of several small districts. George Town, a jumble of narrow streets, bazaars and the court buildings, is in the north, near the harbour. To the southwest is the major thoroughfare of Anna Salai (Mount Rd) and the two main train stations: Egmore, for destinations in Tamil Nadu, and Central, for interstate trains.

History

Chennai and surrounds have been attracting seafaring traders for centuries. As long as 2000 years ago, its residents traded and haggled with Chinese, Greek, Phoenician, Roman and Babylonian merchants. The Portuguese and the Dutch muscled in on this lucrative trade in the 16th century. The British, initially content to purchase spices and other goods from the Dutch, soon had enough of that and in 1639 established a settlement in the fishing village of Madraspatnam. The British East India Company erected Fort St George in 1653.

By the 18th century, the British East India Company had to contend with the French. Robert Clive (Clive of India), a key player in the British campaign, recruited an army of 2000 sepoys (Indian soldiers in British service) and launched a series of military expeditions that developed into the Carnatic Wars. Facing defeat, the French withdrew to Pondicherry (now Puducherry) in 1756.

In the 19th century, the city became the seat of the Madras Presidency, one of the four divisions of British Imperial India. After Independence, growth continued until the city became the significant southern gateway it is today.

Dangers & Annoyances

Convincing a Chennai autorickshaw driver to use the meter is a Vatican-certified miracle; fares border on the astronomical; and post-arrival disputes over pre-agreed fares are not uncommon. Avoid paying up front, and never get into an autorickshaw before reaching an agreement.

Tempting offers of ₹50 'tours' of the city sound too good to be true. They are. Expect to spend the day being dragged from one shop or emporium to another. Some travellers report negotiating cheap fares by agreeing to visit 'just one shop'.

If you have a serious problem with a driver, mentioning a call to the **traffic police** (☎103) can defuse the conflict. See p1000 for details on other modes of transport.

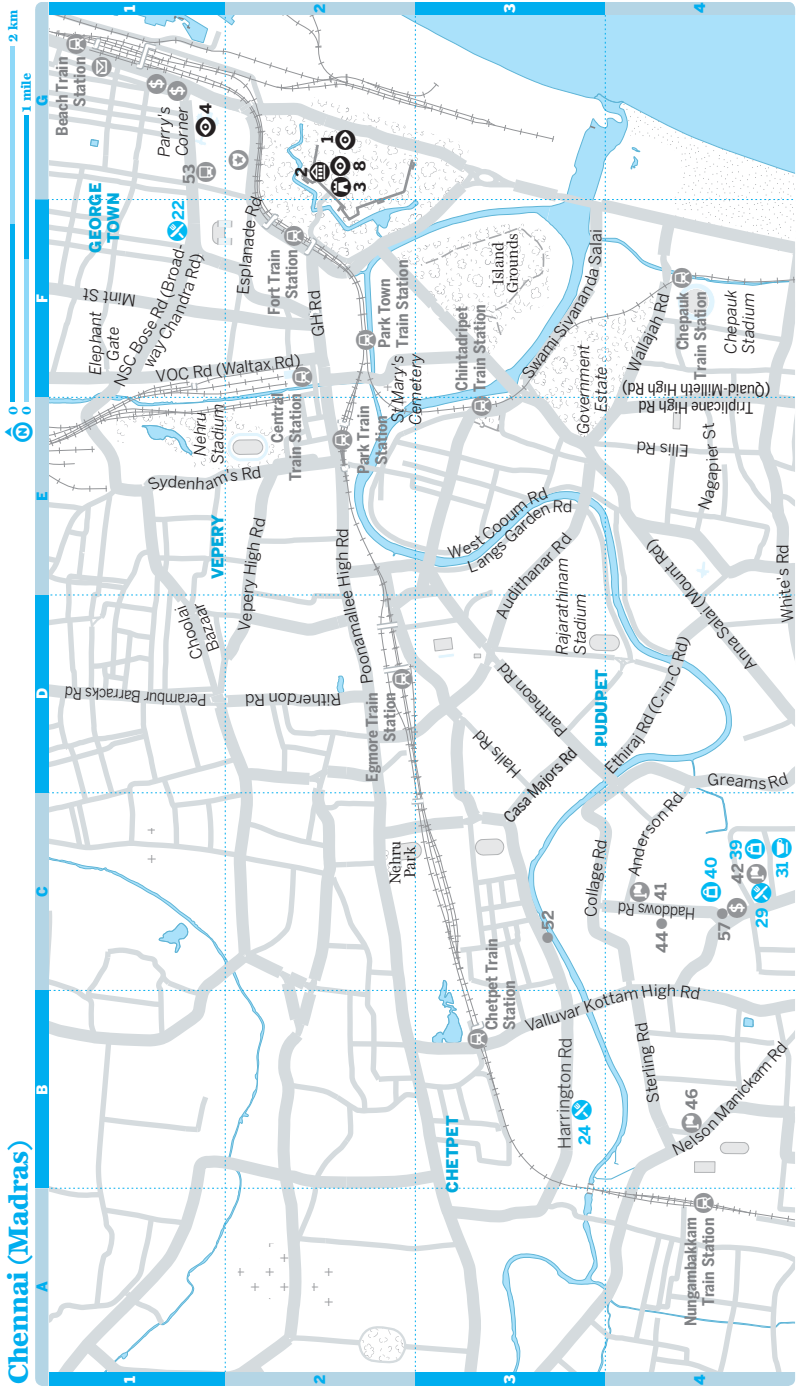
Sights

EGMORE & CENTRAL CHENNAI

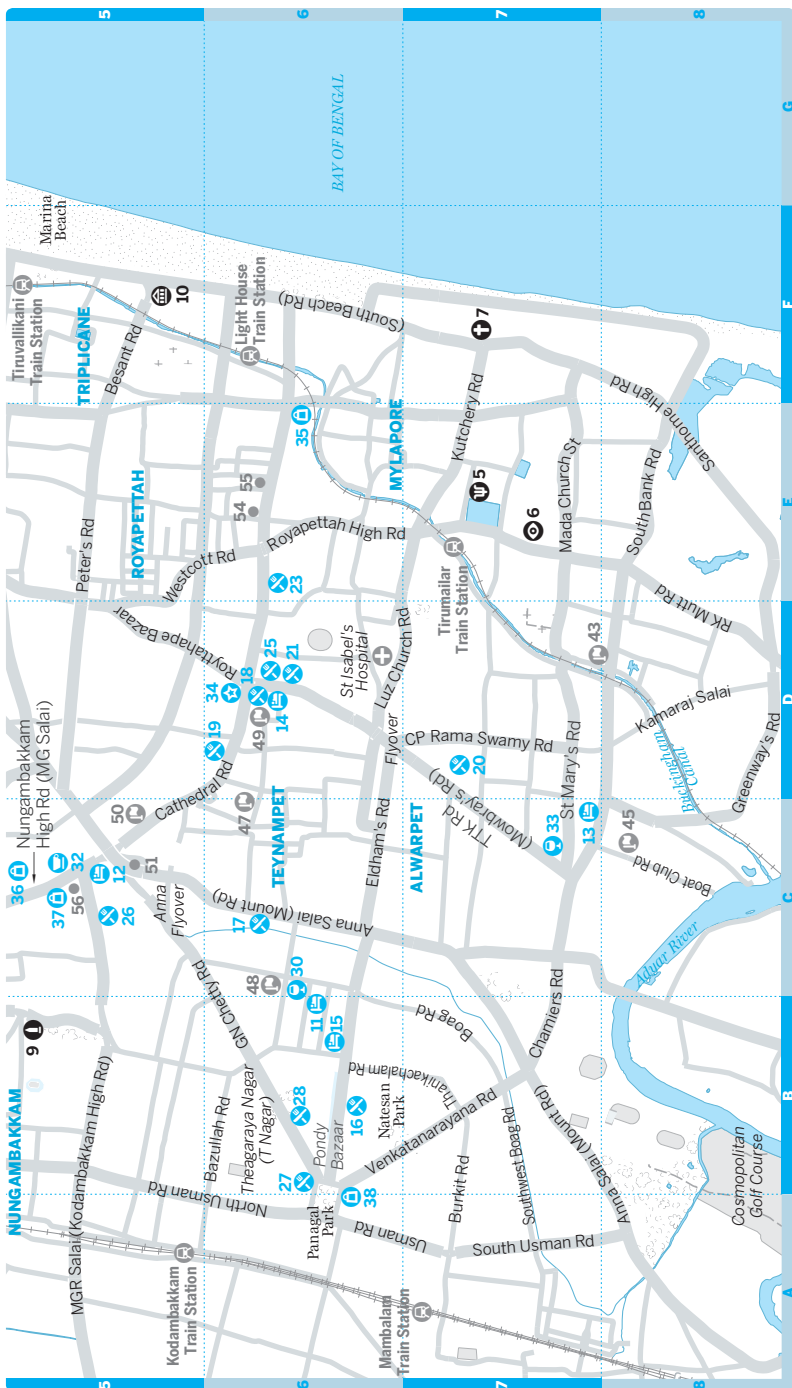
Government Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p990; www.chennaiuseum.org; 486 Pantheon Rd, Egmore; Indian/foreigner ₹15/250, camera/video ₹200/500; ☎9.30am-5pm Sat-Thu) Housed across several British-built buildings known as the Pantheon Complex, this excellent museum is Chennai's best.



Chennai (Madras)



Chennai (Madras)

📍 Sights

- 1 Fort Entrance & Flagstaff..... G2
- 2 Fort Museum..... G2
- 3 Fort St George G2
- 4 High Court.....G1
- 5 Kapaleeshwarar Temple.....E7
- 6 Ramakrishna Mutt Temple.....E7
- 7 San Thome Cathedral.....F7
- 8 Secretariat & Legislative Assembly..... G2
- 9 Valluvar Kottam..... B5
- 10 Vivekanandar Illam..... F5

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Amrit.....(see 39)

🛏 Sleeping

- 11 Lotus..... B6
- 12 Park Hotel C5
- 13 Raintree..... C7
- 14 Raj Park..... D6

- 15 Residency Towers.....B6

🍴 Eating

- 16 Big Bazaar.....B6
- 17 Chit Chat.....C6
- 18 Coconut Lagoon..... D6
- 19 Copper Chimney D6
- 20 Crust.....D7
- 21 Heritage Fresh..... D6
- 22 Hotel Saravana Bhavan.....F1
- 23 Hotel Saravana Bhavan.....E6
- 24 Kailash ParbatB3
Kryptos (see 29)
- 25 Kulfi Corner..... D6
- 26 Kumarakom.....C5
- 27 Murugan Idly Shop.....B6
- 28 Natural Fresh.....B6
- 29 Tuscan Pizzeria.....C4

🍷 Drinking

- 30 10D.....C6

The main building has a respectable **archaeological section** representing all the major South Indian periods, including Chola, Vijayanagar, Hoysala and Chalukya. Don't miss the intricate marble reliefs on display from Amaravathi temple in Andhra Pradesh, or the poignant *sati* stones commemorating women who burned on their husbands' funeral pyres. Further along is a **natural history and zoology** section with a motley collection of skeletons and stuffed birds and animals.

In Gallery 3, the **bronze gallery** has a superb and beautifully presented collection of Chola art. Among the impressive pieces is the bronze of Ardhanariswara, the androgynous incarnation of Shiva and Parvati.

The same ticket gets you into the **National Art Gallery**, the **children's museum** and a small **modern art gallery**, all located in the same complex.

Valluvar Kottam

MONUMENT

(Map p986; Valluvar Kottam High Rd, Kodambakkam; adult/child ₹3/2; ☺8am-6pm) This memorial honours the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar and his classic work, the *Thirukural*. A weaver by trade, Thiruvalluvar lived around the 1st century BC in what is present-day Chennai and wrote this famed poem, providing a moral code for millions of followers. The three-level memorial replicates ancient Tamil architecture and boasts an immense 35m chariot, as well as an enormous audi-

torium and inscriptions of the *Thirukural's* 1330 couplets. It has been closed sporadically for renovation work but this should be completed by the time you read this.

Vivekanandar Illam

MUSEUM

(Map p986; www.sriramakrishnamath.org; South Beach Rd; adult/child ₹2/1; ☺10am-noon & 3-7pm Thu-Tue) The Vivekananda House is interesting not only for the displays on the famous 'wandering monk', but also for the semicircular structure in which it's housed. Swami Vivekananda stayed here briefly in 1897 and preached his ascetic philosophy to adoring crowds. The museum houses a collection of photographs and memorabilia from the swami's life, a gallery of religious historical paintings and the 'meditation room' where Vivekananda stayed. Free one-hour meditation classes are held on Wednesday nights at 7pm (over-15s only).

SOUTH CHENNAI

Kapaleeshwarar Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p986; Kutchery Rd, Mylapore; ☺5am-12.30pm & 4-10pm) Chennai's most active and impressive temple, the ancient Shiva Kapaleeshwarar Temple was rebuilt 300 years ago; some inscriptions from the older temple remain. It is constructed in the Dravidian style and displays the architectural elements – rainbow-coloured *gopuram* (gateway tower), *mandapams* (pavilions in front of a

31	Barista	C4
32	Café Coffee Day	C5
33	Dublin	C7
	Leather Bar	(see 12)
	Pasha	(see 12)

🎭 Entertainment

34	Music Academy	D6
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🛍 Shopping

35	Chennai Citicentre.....	E6
36	Good Earth	C5
	Kumaran Textiles	(see 38)
37	Landmark	C5
38	Nalli Silks.....	A6
39	Naturally Auroville.....	C4
40	Oxford Book Store.....	C4

Information

	American Information Resource Center	(see 50)
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41	British High Commission.....	C4
42	Canadian Honorary Consulate.....	C4
43	Dutch Consulate.....	D7
44	Foreigners' Regional Registration Office	C4
45	German Consulate.....	C8
46	Malaysian Consulate.....	B4
47	New Zealand Consulate.....	C6
48	Singaporean Consulate	C6
49	Sri Lankan Consulate.....	D6
50	US Consulate.....	C5
51	Wildlife Warden's Office.....	C5

Transport

52	Cathay Pacific Airways	C3
53	City Bus Stand.....	G1
54	Malaysia Airlines	E6
55	Singapore Airlines.....	E6
56	Sri Lankan Airlines	C5
57	Thai Airways International.....	C4

temple) and a huge tank – found in the famous temple cities of Tamil Nadu.

Ramakrishna Mutt Temple HINDU TEMPLE
(Map p986; RK Mutt Rd; ☎4.30-11.45am & 3-9pm, puja 8am) The tranquil, leafy grounds of the Ramakrishna Mutt Temple are a world away from the chaos and crazy rickshaw drivers outside. Monks glide around and there's a reverential feel here. The temple itself is a handsome shrine incorporating aspects of Hindu, Christian and Islamic styles; like the Belur Math in Kolkata, it's surprisingly architecturally coherent. It's open to followers of any faith for meditation.

San Thome Cathedral CHURCH
(Map p986; Kamarajar Salai) Originally built by the Portuguese in 1504, then rebuilt in neo-Gothic style in 1893, San Thome Cathedral is a soaring Roman Catholic church between Kapaleeshwarar Temple and Marina Beach. In the basement is a modern chapel housing the tomb of St Thomas the Apostle (Doubting Thomas), who it is said brought Christianity to the subcontinent in the 1st century; above is a museum containing Thomas-related artefacts of varying degrees of historical dubiousness.

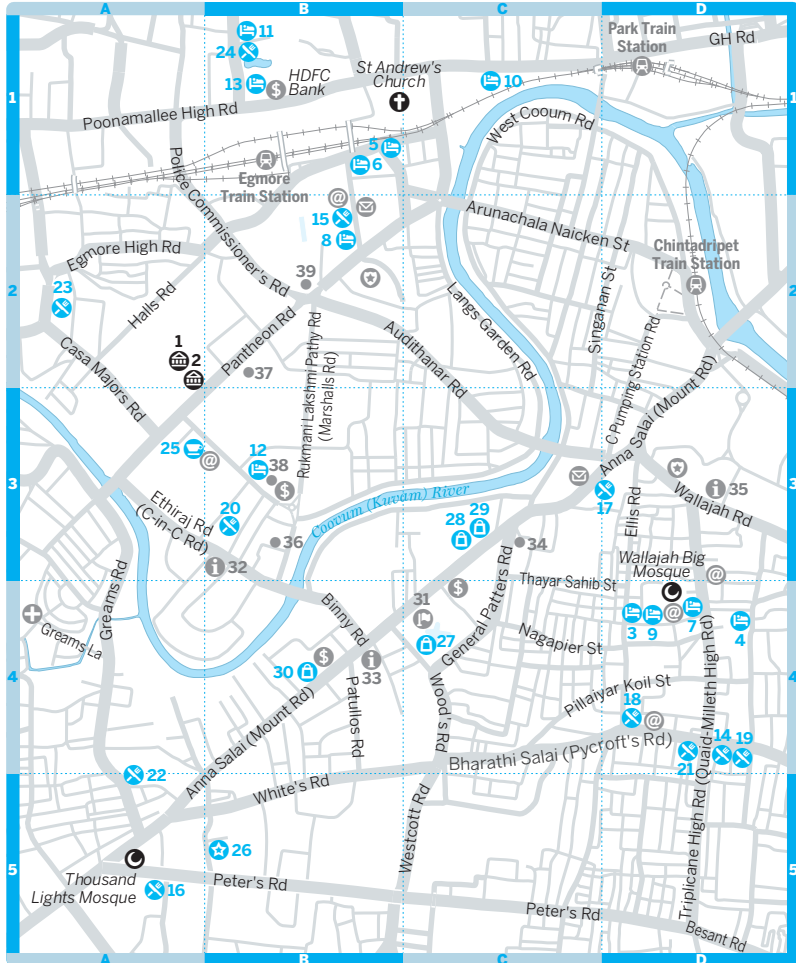
Marina Beach BEACH
Take an early-morning or evening stroll (you really don't want to fry here at any other time) along the 13km sandy stretch of

Marina Beach (Map p986) and you'll pass cricket matches, flying kites, fortune-tellers, fish markets and families enjoying the sea breeze. This beach was especially hard hit by the 2004 tsunami, with around 200 recorded casualties, most of them children. Don't swim here – strong rips make it dangerous.

Theosophical Society GARDEN, HISTORIC SITE
(Map p986; Lattice Bridge Rd; ☎8.30-10am & 2-4pm Mon-Sat) Between the Adyar River and the coast, the 100 hectares of the Theosophical Society provide a green and peaceful retreat from the city. It's a lovely spot to just wander; the sprawling grounds contain a church, mosque, Buddhist shrine and Hindu temple. There's a huge variety of native and introduced trees, including a famed 400-year-old **banyan tree** whose branches offer relieving shade for over 40,000 sq ft. The **Adyar Library** (☎9am-4.30pm) here has an immense collection of books on religion and philosophy, some of which are on display, from thousand-year-old Buddhist scrolls to intricate, handmade 19th-century bibles.

GEORGE TOWN

Fort St George HISTORICAL BUILDING, MUSEUM
(Map p986; ☎8am-5pm) Finished around 1653 by the British East India Company, the fort has undergone many facelifts over the years. Inside the vast perimeter walls is now a precinct housing the **Secretariat &**



Legislative Assembly. The 46m-high **flag-staff** at the main entrance is a mast salvaged from a 17th-century shipwreck.

The **Fort Museum** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100, video ₹25; ☎8am-5pm) has some interesting military memorabilia from the British and French East India Companies, as well as the Raj and Muslim administrations. Fascinating 18th-century etchings show European-looking families being rowed to shore from their ships by *lung-hi*-clad fishermen who look just like their modern-day counterparts on the beach across the street.

High Court

Built in 1892, this red Indo-Saracenic structure (Map p986) at Parry's Corner is said to be the largest judicial building in the world after the Courts of London. You can wander around the court buildings and sit in on sessions.

HISTORICAL BUILDING

OTHER SIGHTS

Little Mount & St Thomas Mount SHRINE
It is believed that from around AD 58, St Thomas lived in hiding at **Little Mount** (Chinnamalai). The cave still bears what some believe to be Thomas' handprint, left when he escaped through an opening that

Anna Salai, Egmore & Triplicane

📍 Sights

- 1 Government Museum A2
2 National Art Gallery A2

🛏 Sleeping

- 3 Broad Lands Lodge D4
4 Cristal Guest House D4
5 Fortel B1
6 Hotel Chandra Park B1
7 Hotel Comfort D4
Hotel Regal (see 8)
8 Masa B2
9 Paradise Guest House D4
10 Royal Regency C1
11 Salvation Army Red Shield
Guest House B1
12 Vestin Park B3
13 YWCA International Guest
House B1

🍴 Eating

- 14 A2B D4
Basil (see 5)
15 Hotel Saravana Bhavan B2
16 Hotel Saravana Bhavan A5
17 Hotel Saravana Bhavan D3
18 Jam Bazaar D4
19 Natural Fresh D4
20 Ponnusamy Hotel B3
21 Ratna Cafe D4
22 Sea Shell A5
23 Sparky's Diner A2
24 Spencer's Daily B1

☕ Drinking

- 25 Café Coffee Day A3

🎬 Entertainment

- 26 Sathyam Cinemas B5

🛍 Shopping

- Fabindia (see 30)
27 Fabindia C4
28 Higginbothams C3
Landmark (see 30)
29 Poompohar C3
30 Spencer Plaza B4

Information

- 31 Australian Consulate C4
32 India Tourism Develoment
Corporation (ITDC) B3
33 Indiatourism B4
34 SP Travels & Tours C3
35 Tamil Nadu Tourism Complex
(TTDC) D3

Transport

- Air France (see 39)
36 Air India B3
37 Air Mauritius B2
Indian Airlines (see 36)
38 Jet Airways B3
Kingfisher Airlines (see 36)
39 KLM B2
Private Bus Stand (see 15)

miraculously appeared. You may be offered water drawn up from the St Thomas miracle spring. Three kilometres on, **St Thomas Mount** (Parangi Malai) is thought to be the site of Thomas' martyrdom in AD 72. The shrine supposedly contains a fragment of Thomas' bone and a cross he carved, among other relics; the views across the city from here are wonderful. Both mounts are about 1km from the Saidapet and St Thomas Mount train stations, respectively.



Activities

Go for a 45-minute *abhyangam* (oil treatment; ₹750) or an extended ayurvedic treatment at **Amrit** (Map p986; ☎65195195; amrit.chennai@gmail.com; 6 Khader Nawaz Khan Rd, Nungambakkam; ☀7am-7pm). It also offers one-hour yoga classes (₹200) or month-long courses (₹1200).

🎓 Courses

International Institute of Tamil Studies

LANGUAGE

(☎22542781; www.ulakaththamizh.org; Central Polytechnic Campus, Adyar) Runs intensive one-month and three-month courses in Tamil. It also sells an instructional CD of Tamil lessons, available through the website.

Vivekanandar Illam

MEDITATION

(Map p986; ☎28446188; Kamarajar Salai, Triplicane) Free one-hour meditation classes (over-15s only) on Wednesday nights at 7pm.

🗺 Tours

TTDC (Map p990; ☎25367850; www.tamilnadu tourism.org; 2 Wallajah Rd, Triplicane; ☀10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) conducts half-day city tours (non-AC/AC ₹140/200) and day trips to

DEFINING DRAVIDIANS

The Tamils consider themselves the standard bearers of Dravidian – pre-Aryan Indian – civilisation. Their culture, language and history are distinctive from North India (although more related than some Tamil nationalists claim), and their ability to trace Tamil identity to classical antiquity is a source of considerable pride.

During the Indus Valley period (2600-1900 BC), the nomadic Aryans drove the city-dwelling Dravidians south while incorporating elements of the latter's beliefs into their holy texts, the Vedas. Later, south-north and class tensions were encouraged by the British, who used these strains to facilitate divide-and-conquer policies.

Ever since Indian independence in 1947, Tamil politicians have railed against caste (which they see as favouring light-skinned Brahmins) and Hindi (as unrelated to Tamil as Russian). The post-independence 'Self Respect' movement, influenced by Marxism, mixed South Indian communal values with class warfare rhetoric and spawned Dravidian political parties that remain major regional powers today.

Many Tamil politicians loudly defend the Tamil Tigers, the same organisation that assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 (imagine a viable, sitting opposition party in your country openly supporting a group that killed your president or prime minister to get an idea of how separate some Tamil parties still consider themselves from India), and there is an unfortunate prejudice among the generally tolerant Tamils towards anything Sinhalese. Throughout the state, male politicians don a white shirt and white *mundu* (sarong), the official uniform of Tamil pride.

Mamallapuram (₹385/550), Puducherry (₹500/750) and Tirupathi (AC ₹915/1135). Every full moon there's an overnight pilgrimage trip to Tiruvannamalai (₹385/630).

Storytrails (☎9600080215, 42124214; www.storytrails.in) runs highly recommended neighbourhood walking tours based around themes such as dance, jewellery and bazaars, as well as tours specially aimed at children.

The classic Enfield Bullet motorcycle has been manufactured in India since 1955 and remains in production today at the **Enfield Factory** (☎42230208; www.royalfield.com; Tiruvottiyur), 17km out of Chennai. Tours (₹600) run on Saturday from 10am to noon.

★ ★ Festivals & Events

Chennai Festival of

Music & Dance

MUSIC, DANCE

(mid-Dec-mid-Jan) One of the largest of its type in the world, this festival is a celebration of Tamil music and dance.

Chennai Sangamam

ARTS

(mid-Jan; www.chennaisangamam.com) Arts and culture festival held in venues around the city, coinciding with the statewide Pongol festival.

🛏 Sleeping

Hotels in Chennai are pricier than in the rest of Tamil Nadu and don't as a rule offer much bang for your buck.

The Triplicane High Rd area is best for budget accommodation. There are some cheapies in Kennet Lane in Egmore, and Egmore is also where you'll find the majority of midrange sleeping options, while the top-end hotels lie further out in leafy, southwest Chennai.

Top-end hotels have central AC and multicuisine restaurants and bars, and they accept credit cards. Note that many hotels in Chennai fill up by noon.

EGMORE



Hotel Chandra Park

HOTEL \$

(Map p990; ☎28191177; info@hotelchandrapark.com; 9 Gandhi Irwin Rd; s/d with AC incl breakfast from ₹899/999; 🍷) How do they do it? Prices keep rising around Chennai but Chandra Park's prices remain mysteriously low. Standard rooms are small but have clean towels and tight, white sheets. Throw in a decent bar, a hearty buffet breakfast and classy front lobby, and this place offers superb value by Chennai standards.

YWCA International

Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p990; ☎25324234; ywcaigh@indiainfo.com; Poonamallee High Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹700/900; 🍷@) Set around sprawling, green and shady grounds right near the Egmore train station, the YWCA manages to offer up healthy doses of hush. There's a slight atmo-

sphere of colonial missionary guesthouse (in a good way), and the rooms adhere to the most demanding levels of cleanliness. It's worth booking in for home-style buffet lunch and/or dinner in the pleasant dining room (₹150/225 for veg/nonveg).

Fortel HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p990; ☎30242424; info@cischennai.in; 3 Gandhi Irwin Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹3500/4000; ☹) Right opposite Egmore train station and remarkably quiet for it, the Fortel is cool and stylish in a dark wood-and-white-walls way, with comfy cushion-laden beds and two good restaurants.

Vestin Park HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p990; ☎28527171; vestinpark@vsnl.com; 39 Montieith Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹2800/3300; ☹) More charming on the outside than in, this corporate-feeling hotel has the kind of bland, reliably clean and comfortable rooms you'd expect at this price. The real draws are the excellent ₹348 lunch and dinner buffet at the **Splendour** restaurant, and the fast and free internet.

Masa HOTEL \$
(Map p990; ☎28193344; 15/1 Kennet Lane; r from ₹460; ☹) The once-grotty Masa has built new budget rooms that were still reasonably fresh at the time of research; the old Masa rooms next door are now called **Hotel Regal**, where you can usually find a fairly grim room (singles/doubles ₹340/420) if all other places are full (as they often are).

Salvation Army Red Shield Guest House HOSTEL \$
(Map p990; ☎25321821; 15 Ritherdon Rd; dm ₹100-150, d ₹300-350) This cheapie lies in a quiet spot north of Egmore train station. It's dingy and grim, believe us, but it's probably the safest sleep in town if you're genuinely down to your last ₹100, and the sheets ain't too bad. Checkout is 9am, and booking ahead *doesn't* guarantee there'll be a bed for you when you arrive.

Royal Regency HOTEL \$\$
(Map p990; ☎25611777; www.regencygroupch.com; 26-27 Poonamallee High Rd; s/d from ₹2300/2600; ☹) Smack-bang between Central and Egmore train stations. By no means the best-value hotel in Chennai, but if you want AC and wi-fi near the train station, it's clean and friendly if a tad battered.

TRIPPLICANE
Cristal Guest House HOTEL \$
(Map p990; ☎28513011; 34 CNK Rd; r from ₹250) In a modern building adhering to the white-tile-on-every-surface school of interior design, the clean abodes here win our 'cheapest rooms in Chennai' award (second edition in a row!).

Broad Lands Lodge HOTEL \$
(Map p990; ☎28545573; broadlandshotel@yahoo.com; 18 Vallabha Agraharam St; r ₹350-600) At this old-school favourite of the dreadlocked brigade, rooms (some much fresher than others) are scattered through a creaky, peeling, colonial-era building that has a certain faint charm. Visitors don't seem to mind the bare-bone, idiosyncratic rooms, the plain concrete floors or the dank shared bathrooms – perhaps the leafy, subdued courtyards and happy communal vibe trumps these shortcomings.

Paradise Guest House HOTEL \$
(Map p990; ☎28594252; paradisegh@hotmail.com; 17 Vallabha Agraharam St; d from ₹400; ☹) Travellers agree that the Paradise boasts some of the best-value digs on this street. Expect simple rooms with clean tiles, a breezy rooftop, friendly staff and hot water by the steaming bucket.

Hotel Comfort HOTEL \$\$
(Map p990; ☎28587661; reservations@hotelcomfortonline.com; 22 Vallabha Agraharam St; s/d from ₹1000/1200; ☹) Clean, fresh, smallish rooms with flat-screen TVs and bright-orange bathrooms. Perfectly comfy.

TRADITIONAL TRADERS

George Town, the area that grew around the fort, retains much of its original flavour. This is the wholesale centre of Chennai (Madras). Many backstreets, bordered by NSC Bose Rd, Krishna Koil St, Mint St and Rajaji Salai, are entirely given over to selling one particular type of merchandise as they have for hundreds of years – paper goods in Anderson St, fireworks in Badrian St and so on. Even if you're not in the market for anything, wander the maze-like streets to see another aspect of Indian life flowing seamlessly from the past into the present.

SOUTH CHENNAI

TOP CHOICE **The Lotus** HOTEL \$\$
 (Map p986; ☎28157272; www.thelotus.in; 15 Venkatraman St, T Nagar; s/d incl breakfast from ₹2000/2700; 🍷🍷) An absolute gem, the Lotus offers a quiet setting away from the main roads, a great veg restaurant, and fresh, stylish, sparkling rooms with wood floors and cheerful decor. There are good deals if you stay for a while, and if you want a kitchen nook with gadgets ahoj, the ₹3800 suite is excellent value.

Residency Towers HOTEL \$\$
 (Map p986; ☎28156363; www.theresidency.com; Sir Theagaraya Nagar Rd, T Nagar; s/d incl breakfast from ₹5200/5700; 🍷🍷🍷) At this price, it's like Residency Towers doesn't know what a good thing it has going: five-star elegance with personality. Every floor is decorated differently, but rooms all have sliding doors in front of windows to block out light and noise, dark-wood furniture and thoughtful touches. Wi-fi is free.

Park Hotel BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$
 (Map p986; ☎42676000; www.theparkhotels.com; 601 Anna Salai; s/d from ₹10,500/11,500; 🍷🍷🍷) We love this uberchic boutique hotel, which flaunts stylish elements like framed old Bollywood posters, towering indoor bamboo gardens and oversized doors. The rooms are petite but have lovely lush bedding, and all the mod cons, including funky bathrooms separated from the boudoir by an opaque glass wall. It's all pretty swish, and as a bonus the pricier rooms include airport pick-up and drop-off.

Raintree HOTEL \$\$\$
 (Map p986; ☎24304050; www.raintreehotels.com; 120 St Mary's Rd, Mylapore; r from ₹8500; 🍷🍷🍷) At this 'ecofriendly' lodge, floors are made of bamboo, wastewater is treated and used for gardening, and electricity conservation holds pride of place. The sleek, minimalist rooms are stylish and comfortable around, and the rooftop infinity pool (which doubles as insulation) has a gorgeous wooden terrace with views of the sea. There's a newer, second branch on Anna Salai.

Raj Park HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎42257777; www.rajpark.com; 180 TTK Rd, Alwarpet; s/d incl breakfast from ₹4200/4800; 🍷🍷🍷) Not the best value in town, but this 'business hotel' is comfy and plush in a corporate kind of way, with friendly staff and lots of little extras. The cheaper rooms are on the small

side. It has one of the more relaxed and affordable hotel bars around.

Eating

Chennai is packed with classic 'meals' joints, which serve thalis for lunch and dinner, and tiffin (snacks) such as *idlis* and dosas the rest of the day. It's tempting – and feasible – to eat every meal at one of Chennai's dozen or so Saravana Bhavan restaurants, where you can count on quality vegetarian food. In the Muslim area around Triplicane High Rd you'll find great biryani joints every few steps – try any of them.

Spencer Plaza has an impressive 3rd-floor food mall with a couple of Western chains, a branch of Hotel Saravana Bhavan (hey, it's Chennai), various fast foods and Chinese options.

EGMORE

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Saravana Bhavan** SOUTH INDIAN \$
 Egmore (Map p990; 21 Kennet Lane; ☎6am-10.30pm); George Town (Map p986; 209 NSC Bose Rd); Mylapore (Map p986; 101 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai; ☎7am-11pm); Thousand Lights (Map p990; 293 Peter's Rd; ☎lunch & dinner); Triplicane (Map p990; Shanthi Theatre Complex, 48 Anna Salai; ☎7am-11pm) Dependably delish, 'meals' at the Saravana Bhavans run around ₹50, though the Mylapore locale has some 'special meals' for ₹100 and up. The Thousand Lights branch is more upscale, with silver cutlery.

Ponnusamy Hotel INDIAN \$
 (Map p990; Wellington Estate, 24 Ethiraj Rd; mains ₹80-110; ☎lunch & dinner) This well-known nonveg place serves curry, biryani and Chettinad specialities. Look out for interesting options like brain fry and rabbit masala. You may be ordered to wash your hands before you can sit down.

Sparky's Diner AMERICAN \$\$
 (Map p990; Ramanathan Salai, Spur Tank Rd; meals ₹180-280; ☎lunch & dinner) An expat-run American diner plastered with US licence plates and movie posters, with Sinatra crooning on the stereo. Come for reliably good Western food, especially the pasta, and a bottomless cup of iced tea (₹45). If you're craving a US-style burger you might have to adjust your expectations a little (they're not bad though).

Basil MULTICUISINE \$\$
 (Map p990; Fortel, 3 Gandhi Irwin Rd; mains ₹150-300) The bigger of the two restaurants at the Fortel hotel has an impressive Western

breakfast range, if you're really after hash browns, as well as tasty North Indian and Continental dishes in a pleasant setting.

TRIPPLICANE

A2B

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Map p990; Bharathi Salai; mains ₹20-50) Enjoy South Indian classics, veg biryani, a wide range of sweets and savoury snacks in clean, AC surrounds. If you've got any room for food left, head a few doors down the road, closer to the beach, where you'll find excellent ice cream at **Natural Fresh** (Map p990; 35 Bharathi Salai).

Ratna Cafe

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Map p990; 255 Triplicane High Rd; dishes ₹30-60) Though often crowded and cramped, Ratna is renowned in Triplicane and beyond for its scrumptious *idlis* and the hearty doses of *sambar* that go with it.

NUNGAMBAKKAM & AROUND

Tuscan Pizzeria

ITALIAN \$\$\$

(Map p986; www.tuscanarestaurants.com; 19, 3rd St, Wallace Garden, Nungambakkam; large pizzas ₹295-525; ☺lunch & dinner) This, my pizza-loving friends, is the real deal, and Chennai is embracing it fast. Tuscana serves authentic thin-crust pizzas with toppings like prosciutto, as well as interesting takes like hoi sin chicken pizza. Pasta and desserts are also top-notch. The expat owner, who is serious about food, also runs a Greek restaurant, **Kryptos**, just round the corner in Kader Nawaz Khan Rd.

Kumarakom

INDIAN \$\$

(Map p986; Kodambakkam High Rd, Nunganbakkam; mains ₹60-160; ☺lunch & dinner) You may have to queue for a table at this classy, popular Kerala restaurant with dark-wood furniture, cool AC and busy waiters. The seafood is the standout – try the prawns masala – but everything's fresh and tasty.

Sea Shell

MIDDLE EASTERN, INDIAN \$

(Map p990; ☎28295788; 55 Greaves Rd, Thousand Lights; mains ₹50-150; ☺lunch & dinner) A bustling, super-popular spot with Middle Eastern favourites like hummus and shawarma in addition to a big menu of North Indian and Chinese. Choose from a long list of bizarrely named mocktails: 'Carbuncle', 'Rolex' or 'Flosberry Flop' anyone?

Kailash Parbat

NORTH INDIAN \$

(Map p986; 1st fl, 9 Harrington Rd, Chetpet; mains ₹60-130; ☺lunch & dinner) A huge range of tasty street-stall food – *pani puri*, *chaat*

pav, *bhaji* and more – at decent prices in AC comfort. Specialises in veg-only Sindhi and Punjabi dishes, including paneer cooked a bunch of different ways. There's a wee branch in the food court at Ampa Skywalk mall.

SOUTH CHENNAI

Copper Chimney

NORTH INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p986; 74 Cathedral Rd, Teynampet; mains ₹250-350; ☺noon-3pm & 6-11.30pm) The vegetarian dishes aren't the priority here, but meat eaters will drool over the yummy North Indian tandoori dishes served among plush furnishings. The fish tikka – lumps of skewered tandoori-baked fish – is superb.

Murugan Idly Shop

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Map p986; 77 GN Chetty Rd, T Nagar; dishes ₹25-60) Those in the know generally agree this particular branch of the small chain serves some of the best *idli* and South Indian meals in town. We heartily concur. For after there's a branch of the very good **Natural Fresh** ice-cream chain just across the road.

Crust

CAFE \$\$

(Map p986; 18 Bheemanna Garden Rd, Abhiramapuram; sandwiches ₹70-140, pasta ₹150-180; ☺lunch) In a leafy courtyard, enjoy sandwiches on bread like you've never tasted in India, as well as quiche, fresh salads and delicious brownies, cakes and tiramisu (made with marscapone flown all the way from Delhi!). Plans are in the works for an expanded restaurant and menu.

Chit Chat

CAFE \$\$

(Map p986; 532 Anna Salai, Teynampet; mains ₹100-250; ☺lunch & dinner) This spot presents as a casual, clean Western-style cafe, and has a wide menu of sandwiches, pizza, kebabs and posh North Indian lunch combos (₹140 to ₹190). It's famous for its milkshakes, and has a cake shop out the front.

Coconut Lagoon

SEAFOOD \$\$\$

(Map p986; cnr Cathedral & TTK Rds, Alwarpet; mains ₹100-200; ☺noon-3pm & 7-11.45pm) Excellent Kerala and Goan fare with a focus on seafood delicacies, such as *kari meen polli chathu* (fish masala steamed in banana leaf). If you've got room there's good ice cream across the road at **Kulfi Corner**.

Self-Catering

Big Bazaar

SUPERMARKET

(Map p986; Sir Theagaraya Nagar Rd, T Nagar) Americans, they've got Oreos. Aussies, they've got Tim Tams. You're welcome.

Heritage Fresh

(Map p986; TTK Rd, Alwarpet; ☺9am-8.30pm)

SUPERMARKET

Jam Bazaar

(Map p990; cnr Ellis Rd & Bharathi Salai, Triplicane) Animated market bursting with fruit, vegetables and spices.

MARKET

Spencer's Daily

(Map p990; Ritherdon Rd; ☺9.30am-9pm)

SUPERMARKET

**Drinking****Cafes**

Popular coffee chains are dotted around Chennai, including **Barista** (Map p986; Rosy Towers, Nungambakkam High & D Khader Nawaz Khan Rds, Nungambakkam; ☺7.30am-11.30pm) and **Café Coffee Day** (☺10am-11pm) Aminjikarai (Ampa Skywalk mall, Poonamallee High Rd; ☺9am-9pm); Egmore (Map p990; Alsa Mall, Montieth Rd); Nungambakkam (Map p986; 123/124 Nungambakkam High Rd).

Bars & Nightclubs

Chennai's nightlife throbs that little bit more every year, though it doesn't help that bars and clubs are supposed to close by midnight and are restricted to hotels. The very pricey (by any standards) bars at the five-star hotels are about the only place to get a drink without thumpingly loud music in the background.

Nightclubs attached to five-star hotels draw big crowds; at the time of research the hottest clubs were **Pasha** (Park Hotel, 601 Anna Salai; ☺8.30-11.30pm Wed-Sun) and **Dublin** (Sheraton Park, 132 TTK Rd; ☺8-11.30pm Wed-Sun). Admission is around the ₹1000 mark for couples and solo guys, and usually free for women.

Geoffrey's Pub

(Radha Regent, 171 Jawaharlal Nehru Salai, Arumbakkam; ☺4-11pm) This basement 'English' pub is one of the few places in Chennai that hosts live music nightly (save Sundays, when there's a DJ). Not always great music, but music nonetheless. The atmosphere is casual, with Kollywood types occasionally gracing the place with their presence.

BAR

Leather Bar

(Map p986; Park Hotel, 601 Anna Salai; ☺8.30-11.30pm) 'Leather' refers to floor and wall coverings rather than anything kinky. This tiny, modish pad has mixologists dishing up fancy drinks and DJs spinning dance tunes. How half of Chennai fits into this teensy space on Friday and Saturday nights is a mystery.

BAR

10D

(10 Downing St; Map p986; www.10ds.net; North Boag Rd, T Nagar; ☺11am-11pm) An English-themed pub (pictures of Big Ben on the wall, devilled eggs and fish fingers on the menu), often packed with a mixed bag of punters. Wednesday is Ladies Night. (Pro tip: skip the devilled eggs and go for the tasty tandoori snacks.)

PUB

**Entertainment****Classical Music & Dance****Kalakshetra Arts Village**

(☎24521169; kshetra@vsnl.com; Dr Muthulakshmi Rd, Tiruvanmiyu) Founded in 1936, Kalakshetra is committed to reviving classical dance and music. Check out one of its regular performances. Four-month courses in music and dance are available.

DANCE, MUSIC

Music Academy

(Map p986; ☎28112231; www.musicacademy.madras.com; cnr Roytthahape & Cathedral Rds) This is Chennai's most popular public venue for Carnatic classical music and Bharata Natyam dance. Many performances are free. Check the website for upcoming events.

DANCE, MUSIC

Cinema

Chennai has more than 100 cinemas, a reflection of the vibrant film industry here. Most screen Tamil films, but **PV Cinema** (www.pvrcinemas.com; Ampa Skywalk mall, Poonamallee High Rd, Aminjikarai) regularly shows English-language films, as does **Sathyam Cinema** (Map p990; www.sathyamcinemas.com; 8 Thiruvika Rd, Royapettah). Tickets are around ₹120, and you can book online.

**Shopping**

Theagaraya Nagar (aka T Nagar; Map p986) has great shopping, especially at Pondy Bazaar and around Panagal Park. Nungambakkam's shady D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd (Map p986) is a pleasant lane of shops, cafes and galleries. There's a good branch of the fixed-price government handicrafts chain **Poompuhar** (Map p990; ☺10am-8pm Mon-Sat) in Anna Salai.

The best commercial shopping malls include **Spencer Plaza** (Map p990; Anna Salai), **Ampa Skywalk** (Poonamallee High Rd, Aminjikarai) and **Chennai Citicentre** (Map p986; Dr Radhakrishnan Salai, Mylapore). Ampa Skywalk is the poshest and hosts mostly international chains, while Spencer Plaza is better for slightly cheaper shops, including Kashmiri souvenir stores and lots of clothes.

Fabindia

HOMEWARES & FOOD

Spencer Plaza (Map p990; Anna Salai; ☉11am-8pm); Woods Rd (Map p990; ☉10am-8pm) The Woods Rd shop has home and food sections, along with fabulous clothes.

Naturally Auroville

HOMEWARES

(Map p986; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd, Nungambakkam; ☉10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11.30am-7pm Sun) *Objets* (pottery, bedspreads, scented candles) and fine foods (organic coffees, breads and cheeses) from Auroville, near Pondicherry.

Good Earth

HOMEWARES

(Map p986; www.goodearth.in; 3 Rutland Gate, 4th St, Thousand Lights; ☉11am-8pm Mon) Gorgeous homewares, furniture, original artwork and more. All Indian inspired and themed, it often has a sense of humour – look for the series of autorickshaw-themed products.

Silk

Many of the finest Kanchipuram silks turn up in Chennai, so consider doing your silk shopping here. The streets around Panagal Park are filled with silk shops; if you're lucky enough to be attending an Indian wedding this is where you buy your sari. Try one of these:

Nalli Silks

FABRIC

(Map p986; 9 Nageswaran Rd, T Nagar; ☉9.30am-9.30pm) The granddaddy of silk shops. There's a big readymades shop next door with gorgeous *saltwar kameez*.

Kumaran Textiles

FABRIC

(Map p986; 12 Nageswaran Rd, T Nagar; ☉9am-9.30pm) Saris, saris and plenty of Kanchipuram silk.

Bookshops**Higginbothams**

BOOKSTORE

(Map p990; higginbothams@vsnl.com; 116 Anna Salai; ☉9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-7.30pm Sun) Decent English-language book selection. Has a branch at the airport.

Landmark

BOOKSTORE

Aminjikarai (Ampa Skywalk mall, Poonamallee High Rd; ☉10am-9pm); Anna Salai (Map p990; Spencer Plaza, Phase II; ☉9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-9pm Sun); Nungambakkam (Map p986; Apex Plaza, Nungambakkam High Rd; ☉9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-9pm Sun)

Oxford Book Stores

BOOKSTORE

(Map p986; 39/12 Haddows Rd, Nungambakkam; ☉9.30am-9.30pm) A big selection, tables and colouring-in equipment for kiddies, and a cafe.

i Information**Internet Access**

There are 'browsing centres' all over town; most charge between ₹20 and ₹30 an hour.

Cyber Palace (Map p990; Bharathi Salai; per hr ₹20; ☉9am-10pm)

Dreamzzz Zone (Map p990; Alsa Mall, Egmore; per hr ₹20; ☉8.30am-10.30pm) Clean, fast, AC.

Internet Zone (Map p990; 1 Kennet Lane, Egmore; per hr ₹30; ☉8am-10pm)

Log In Net Cafe (Map p990; 35 Triplicane High Rd, Triplicane; per hr ₹15; ☉9am-11pm)

SGee (Map p990; ☎42310391; 20 Vallabha Agraharam St, Triplicane; per hr ₹20; ☉24hr)

Left Luggage

Egmore and Central train stations have left-luggage counters, as do the international and domestic airports.

Medical Services

Apollo Hospital (Map p990; ☎28293333, emergency 28290792; www.apollohospitals.com; 21 Grems Lane) Cutting-edge hospital popular with international 'medical tourists'.

St Isabel's Hospital (Map p986; ☎24991081; 18 Oliver Rd, Mylapore)

Money

ATMs are everywhere; there's a cluster at the front of Central train station.

HDFC Bank (Map p990; Poonamallee High Rd, Egmore; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Foreign exchange and ATM; handy to the YWCA and Salvation Army guesthouses.

State Bank of India Anna Salai (Map p990; Anna Salai; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat); George Town (Map p986; 22 Rajaji Salai, George Town; ☉10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

Thomas Cook Anna Salai (Map p990; Spencer Plaza, Phase I; ☉9.30am-6.30pm); Egmore (Map p990; 45 Montith Rd; ☉9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun); George Town (Map p986; 20 Rajaji Salai; ☉9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat); Nungambakkam (Map p986; Eldorado Bldg, 112 Nungambakkam High Rd; ☉9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat) Changes currency and travellers cheques with no commission.

Post

DHL (Map p990; ☎4214886/7; 85 Pantheon Rd, Egmore; ☉8am-11pm) For secure international parcel delivery. There's a few branches around, including one on Esplanade Rd in George Town.

Post office Anna Salai (Map p990; ☉8am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun, poste restante 10am-6pm Mon-Sat); Egmore (Map p990; Kennet Lane; ☉10am-6pm Mon-Sat); George Town (Map p986; Rajaji Salai; ☉8am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun)

Tourist Information

Check out **Chennai Best** (www.chennaiest.com) and **Chennai Online** (www.chennaionline.com).

India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC; Map p990; ☎28281250; www.attindia.tourism.com; 29 Cherian Cres, Egmore; ☀10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Hotel and tour bookings only; they're not very helpful.

Indiatourism (Map p990; ☎28460285; ind-tour@dataone.in; 154 Anna Salai; ☀9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Maps and information on all of India.

Tamil Nadu Tourism Complex (TTDC; Map p990; ☎25367850; www.tamilnadutourism.org; 2 Wallajah Rd, Triplicane; ☀10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Brochure-filled state tourist offices from all over India. The tour-booking desk at the Tamil Nadu office (☎25383333) is supposedly open 24 hours.

Travel Agencies

South Tourism (☎42179092; www.south.tourism.in; 1 Z-Block, 19th St, Anna Nagar West) Recommended agency for tours and bookings.

SP Travels & Tours (Map p990; ☎28604001; sptravels1@eth.net; 90 Anna Salai, Triplicane; ☀9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat)

Visa Extensions

Foreigners' Regional Registration Office (Map p986; ☎28251721; Shastri Bhavan, Haddows Rd, Nungambakkam; ☀9.30am-12.30pm Mon-Fri) Everything will take complicated wrangling and copious doses of patience (we had to sit in a queue for half an hour just to be told the opening hours), but you can usually get extensions for all visas except tourist here (tourist visas are only extended in cases of medical emergency). Theoretically, they take 10 days to process.

i Getting There & Away

Air

AIRPORTS The international **Anna terminal** (☎22560551) of Chennai Airport in Tirusulam, 16km southwest of the centre, is efficient and not too busy, making Chennai a good entry or exit point. The domestic **Kamaraj terminal** (☎22560551) is next door.

DOMESTIC AIRLINES

Indian Airlines (Map p990; ☎28578153/4, airport 22561906; 19 Rukmani Lakshmi Pathy Rd (Marshalls Rd), Egmore)

IndiGo (☎22560286; airport)

Jet Airways (Map p990; ☎domestic 39893333, international 1800 225522; 41/43 Montieth Rd, Egmore; ☀9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

Kingfisher Airlines (Map p990; ☎43988400; 19 Rukmani Lakshmi Pathy Rd (Marshalls Rd), Egmore)

SpiceJet (☎1800 1803333; airport)

INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES

Air France (Map p990; ☎1800 1800033; Kuber's Bldg, 42 Pantheon Rd, Egmore)

Air India (Map p990; ☎1800 1801407; 19 Rukmani Lakshmi Pathy Rd (Marshalls Rd), Egmore) Air India Express has a desk here.

Air Mauritius (Map p990; ☎43508811; Prince Plaza, Pantheon Rd, Egmore; ☀9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

Cathay Pacific Airways (Map p986; ☎18002091616; 47 Major Ramanathan Salai (Spur Tank Rd), Chetpet)

KLM (Map p990; ☎1800 1800044; Kuber's Bldg, 42 Pantheon Rd, Egmore)

Lufthansa (☎22569393; airport)

Malaysia Airlines (Map p986; ☎42199999; 90 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai, Mylapore)

Singapore Airlines (Map p986; ☎45921921; Westminster, 108 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai, Mylapore)

Sri Lankan Airlines (Map p986; ☎43921100; 4 Kodambakkam High Rd, Nungambakkam)

Thai Airways International (Map p986; ☎22561928; 31 Haddows Rd, Nungambakkam)

Boat

Passenger ships sail from the George Town harbour to Port Blair in the Andaman Islands (see p1070) every five to 10 days or so. The **Director of Shipping Services** (Map p986; ☎25226873; fax 25220841; Shipping Corporation Bldg, Rajaji Salai, George Town; ☀10am-4pm Mon-Sat) sells tickets (₹1962 to ₹7642) for the 60-hour trip. You will need two photographs and three photocopies each of your passport identity page and visa. Bring a book, take a number and try to position yourself near a fan – it can be a long process.

Bus

Most Tamil Nadu (SETC) and other government buses operate from the chaotic **Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus** (CMBT; off Map p986; Jawaharlal Nehru Salai, Koyambedu), better known as Koyambedu CMBT, 7km west of town.

Bus 15 or 15B from Parry's Corner or Central train station, and 27B from Anna Salai or Egmore train station, all head there (₹5, 45 minutes). An autorickshaw charges around ₹150 for the same ride.

SETC, Karnataka (KSRTC) and Andhra Pradesh (APRTC) bus services cover the destinations listed in the table (p1000), usually in the morning and late afternoon.

Several companies operate Volvo AC buses to the same destinations from the less overwhelming private-bus station next door to CMBT. There's another, smaller private bus stand (Map p990) opposite Egmore train station. These

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS FROM CHENNAI (MADRAS)

DESTINATION	AIRLINE	FARE FROM (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bengaluru	IC	2115	¾	3 daily
	9W	3333	1	4 daily
	6E	2033	1	daily
Delhi	IC	4071	2½	4 daily
	9W	5475	2½	6 daily
	SG	3432	2½	4 daily
	6E	3432	2½	4 daily
Goa	IC	2666	1¼	4 weekly
	SG	2312	1¼	daily
Hyderabad	IC	2115	1	2 daily
	9W	3333	1	2 daily
	6E	2033	1	2 daily
	SG	2033	1	daily
Kochi	IC	2115	1	2 daily
	9W	3333	1	2 daily
Kolkata	IC	5971	2	2 daily
	9W	5844	2	2 daily
	SG	3033	2	daily
	6E	3033	2	3 daily
Mumbai	IC	3325	2	4 daily
	9W	5589	2	6 daily
	SG	3033	2	daily
	6E	3033	2½	2 daily
Port Blair	IC	6376	2	daily
	9W	5787	2	daily
Trivandrum	IC	2115	1½	2 daily
	9W	3700	1½	daily

Note: fares are one-way only

Airline codes: 6E – IndiGo, 9W – Jet Airways, IC – Indian Airlines, SG – SpiceJet

super-deluxe buses usually leave at night and cost two to three times more than ordinary buses.

Train

Interstate trains and those heading west generally depart from Central train station (Map p986), while trains heading south depart from Egmore (Map p990). The **Train Reservation**

Complex (📍general 139; 🕒8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) is in a separate 10-storey building just west of Central train station; the Foreign Tourist Assistance Cell (one of the best ever) is on the 1st floor. Egmore's **booking office** (📍28194579) keeps the same hours.

BUS SERVICES FROM CHENNAI (MADRAS)

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bengaluru	180-260	9	every 30min
Chidambaram	80-90	7	6 daily
Coimbatore	220-300	11½	9 daily
Ernakulam (Kochi)	420-600	16½	2 daily
Kodaikanal	200-230	13	daily
Madurai	160-190	10	every 30min
Mamallapuram	35	2	every 15-30min
Mysore	200-240	11	10 daily
Ooty	250-320	14	daily
Puducherry	45-90	3½	every 30min
Thanjavur	130-150	8½	hourly
Tirupathi	60-70	3½	every 30min
Trichy	120-190	7	every 15-30min
Trivandrum	330-450	17	7 daily

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

The cheapest way to reach the airport is by MRTS train to Tirusulam station, 300m across the road from the terminals. An autorickshaw will cost you at least ₹250/350 for a day/night trip. Both terminals have prepaid taxi kiosks, where tickets are ₹500 to Egmore or Anna Salai/Triplicane, or out to CMBT (main bus terminus). If you want to bypass Chennai, the kiosks can organise taxis straight from here to destinations including Mahabalipuram (₹2000) or Puducherry (₹4000).

Authorickshaw

Rickshaw drivers in Chennai routinely quote astronomical fares for both locals and tourists alike. Since you have no chance of getting a driver to use the meter, expect to pay at least ₹40 for a short trip down the road. From Egmore to George Town, Triplicane or Anna Salai will cost around ₹70, to Nungambakkam ₹90. Prices are at least 25% higher after 10pm. There's a prepaid booth outside Central station.

Bus

Chennai's bus system is worth getting to know. The main city bus stand (Map p986) is at Parry's Corner, and fares are between ₹5 and ₹12. Some useful routes are listed in the table, p1002.

Car & Taxi

For an extended hire, organise a driver through a travel agent or large hotel. You might pay a little more, but the driver should be reliable and you'll have a point of contact should something go

wrong. Non-AC rates are around ₹600 per half-day (five hours) within the city.

Train

Efficient MRTS trains run every 15 minutes from Beach station to Fort, Park (at Central station), Egmore, Chetpet, Nungambakkam, Kodambakkam, Mambalam, Saidapet, Guindy, St Thomas Mount, Tirusulam (for the airport), and on down to Tambaram. The second line branches off at Park and hits Light House and Tirumailar (at Kapaleeshwarar Temple).

NORTHERN TAMIL NADU

Chennai to Mamallapuram

Chennai's sprawl peters out after an hour or two heading south on the coastal road, at which point Tamil Nadu becomes open road, red dirt, khaki sand and blue skies (or, if you take the inland road being developed as an 'information technology corridor', huge new buildings). Currently this stretch of sand is the only area of Tamil Nadu's 1076km coastline that's being developed for traditional beachside tourism.

There's a tropical bohemian groove floating around Injambakkam village, site of the **Cholamandal Artists' Village** (☎044-4926092; www.cholamandalartistsvillage.org; admission free; ☀9.30am-9pm). This 4-hectare

MAJOR TRAINS FROM CHENNAI (MADRAS)

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURE
Bengaluru	2007 Shatabdi Express*	510/995	4½	6am CC
	2609 Bangalore Express	108/380	6	1.35pm CC
Delhi	2615 Grand Trunk Express	528/1429/1960	35	7.15pm CC
	2621 Tamil Nadu Express	528/1429/1960	33	10pm CC
Coimbatore	6627 West Coast Express	212/564/772	8½	11.30am CC
	2671 Nilgiri Express	232/594/802	8	9pm CC
Goa	7311 Vasco Express**	347/947/1302	22	1.40pm CC
Hyderabad	2759 Charminar Express	312/823/1119	14	6.10pm CC
	2603 Hyderabad Express	297/779/1095	13	4.45pm CC
Kochi	6041 Alleppey Express	269/728/998	11¾	9.15pm CC
Kolkata	2842 Coromandel Express	461/1242/1700	27	8.45am CC
	2840 Howrah Mail	461/1242/1700	28½	11.40pm CC
Madurai	6127 Gurusvayur Express	212/564/772	8¾	7.50am CE
	2635 Vaigai Express	132/471	8	12.40pm CE
Mumbai	1042 Mumbai Express	383/1046/1440	26	11.55am CC
	2164 Dadar Express	403/1076/1470	23	6.50am CE
Mysore	2007 Shatabdi Express*	655/1265	7	6am CC
	6222 Kaveri Express	212/564/772	10½	9.30pm CC
Tirupathi	6053 Tirupathi Express	60/206	3	1.50pm CC
Trichy	2605 Pallavan Express	104/367	5½	3.45pm CE
Trivandrum	2695 Trivandrum Express	341/903/1230	16	3.25pm CC

Departure codes: CC – Chennai Central, CE – Chennai Egmore

*Daily except Wednesday; ** Friday only

Shatabdi fares are chair/executive; Express and Mail fares are 2nd/chair car for day trains, sleeper/3AC/2AC for overnight trains

artists' cooperative (18km south of Chennai) is a serene muse away from the world and a quiet chance to both see and purchase contemporary Indian art direct from the source. There are two simple studio-cum-guesthouses but they are available for visiting artists only (₹500; book well in advance).

As Cholamandal is to contemporary Indian expression, **DakshinaChitra** (☎044-27472603; www.dakshinachitra.net; Indian adult/student ₹75/30, foreign adult/student ₹200/75; ☺10am-6pm Wed-Mon) is to traditional arts and crafts. Located about 12km south of Cholamandal, this is a jumble of open-air museum, preserved village and artisan

workshops – another well-worth-it stop (especially for the kids) for learning about the Dravidian crafts of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. DakshinaChitra means 'A Picture of the South', which is essentially what you're provided via local pottery, silk-weaving, puppet-building and basket-making workshops, traditional theatre performances and art studios.

Along this stretch of road the TTDC runs the **Muttukadu Boat House** (☺9am-6pm), where you can take a 45-minute boat trip (per person from ₹45) out on the backwaters.

One of the best institutions of its kind in India, **Crocodile Bank** (☎044-27472447; www.madrascrocodilebank.org; adult/child ₹35/10,

CHENNAI BUS ROUTES

BUS NO	ROUTE
29K	Koyambedu CMBT–Guindy–Adyar–Mylapore
9, 10	Parry's–Central–Egmore–T Nagar
11/11A	Parry's–Anna Salai–T Nagar
15B	Parry's–Central–Koyambedu CMBT
18	Parry's–Saidapet
19G	Parry's–Central–Adyar
27B	Egmore–Chetpet–Koyambedu CMBT
31	Parry's–Central–Vivekananda Illam
32	Central–Triplicone–Vivekananda Illam
51M	T Nagar–St Thomas Mount

camera/video ₹20/100; ☀8.30am–5.30pm Tue–Sun), 40km south of Chennai, is a fascinating peek into a world of reptiles, and an incredible conservation trust to boot. The Bank does crucial work towards protecting the critically endangered gharial, an enormous but harmless (to humans) species of crocodylian that feeds on fish and has a long, thin nose. There are thousands of other reptiles here, including the Indian mugger and saltwater crocs of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. If you have a spare evening on the weekend, come for the **night safari** (adult/child ₹60/20; ☀7–8pm Sat & Sun), when you can shine a flashlight over the water and catch the staring eyes of thousands of the Bank's local residents. Volunteer opportunities are available here; see the website for details.

About 5km north of Mamallapuram in the village of Salavankuppam, beside the East Coast Rd, the **Tiger Cave** is a rock-cut shrine, possibly dating from the 7th century. It's dedicated to Durga and has a small *mandapam* featuring a crown of carved *yali* (mythical lion creature) heads.

To reach these places, take any bus heading south from Chennai to Mamallapuram and ask to be let off at the appropriate destination. Another option is the TTDC's hop-on, hop-off **bus tour** (☎044-25383333; www.tamilnadutourism.org/hopontour.html; ₹250) that runs between Chennai and Mamallapuram on the half-hour between 9am and 11am, and in the other direction between 4.15pm and 6pm. A taxi for a full-day tour costs from about ₹1600. You can swim along the coast, but beware of strong currents and tides as there are no lifeguards around.

Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram)

☎044 / POP 12,345

This World Heritage Site was once a major seaport and second capital of the Pallava kings, and a saunter through the town's great carvings and temples at sunset, when the sandstone turns bonfire orange and blood red and modern carvers *tink-tink* with their chisels on the street, enflames the imagination.

And then, in addition to ancient archaeological wonders, there's the traveller ghetto of Othavadaai Cross St. You'll hear the mellow trills of Jack Johnson. Bob Marley flags hang from the balconies. Stores sell things from Tibet, 'Indian' clothes that few Indians would probably ever wear, toilet paper, hand sanitiser and used books, and you know you have landed, once again, in the Kingdom of Backpackistan.

'Mal', as many travellers call it, is less than two hours by bus from Chennai, and many travellers make a beeline here straight from Chennai. The village is tiny and laid-back, and the surrounding sites of interest can be explored on foot or by bicycle.

👁 Sights

You can easily spend a full day exploring the temples, *mandapams* and rock carvings around Mamallapuram. Apart from the Shore Temple and Five Rathas, admission is free. Official guides from the Archaeological Survey of India can be found at archaeological sites and hired for around ₹50 (give more if the tour is good); they're well worth the money.

Shore Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(combined ticket with Five Rathas Indian/foreigner ₹10/250, video ₹25; ☀6.30am-6pm) Standing like a magnificent fist of rock-cut elegance overlooking the sea, the Shore Temple symbolises the heights of Pallava architecture and the maritime ambitions of the Pallava kings. Its small size belies its excellent proportion and the supreme quality of the carvings, many of which have been eroded into vaguely Impressionist embellishments. Originally constructed in the 7th century, it was later rebuilt by Narasimhavarman II and houses two central shrines to Shiva. The layout is meant to resemble the perfect cosmic body, with the head and heart located over the spire that dominates the structure. Facing east and west, the original linga (phallic images of Shiva) captured the sunrise and sunset. The temple is believed to be the last in a series of buildings that extended along a since submerged coastline; this theory gained credence during the 2004 tsunami, when receding waters revealed the outlines of what may have been sister temples.

Five Rathas

HINDU TEMPLES

(Five Rathas Rd; combined ticket with Shore Temple Indian/foreigner ₹10/250, video ₹25; ☀6.30am-6pm) Carved from single pieces of rock, the Five Rathas are low-laying monoliths that huddle in more ancient subtlety than grandeur. Each temple is dedicated to a Hindu god and named for one of the Pandavas, the five hero-brothers of the epic Mahabharata, plus their common wife, Draupadi.

The shrines are meant to resemble chariots (*ratha* is Sanskrit for chariot), and were hidden in the sand until excavated by the British 200 years ago. Outside each *ratha* is a carving of an animal mount of the gods. Taken together, the layout theme of God, Pandava and animal mount is remarkable for its architectural consistency, considering everything here was cut from single chunks of rock.

The first *ratha*, **Draupadi Ratha**, on the left after you enter the gate, is dedicated to Draupadi and the goddess Durga, who represents the sacred femininity and fertility of the Indian soil. The goddess looks out at her worshippers from a carved lotus throne, while outside, a huge sculpted lion stands guard.

Behind the goddess shrine, a huge Nandi (bull, vehicle of Shiva) heralds the chariot of the most important Pandava. **Arjuna Ratha** is appropriately dedicated to Shiva, the most important deity of the Pallavas. Other gods,

including the Vedic Indra, are depicted on the outer walls.

Look around the lintels of the middle temple, **Bhima Ratha**, and you'll notice faded faces that some archaeologists believe possess Caucasian features, evidence of Mamallapuram's extensive trade ties with ancient Rome. Inside is a shrine to Vishnu.

Guides may tell you the carving of Pallava king Narasimhavarman on **Dharmaraja Ratha**, the tallest of the chariots, resembles an Egyptian pharaoh, suggesting even earlier trade ties across the Indian Ocean. The theory is tantalising, but not terribly well substantiated. The final *ratha*, **Nakula-Sahadeva Ratha**, is dedicated to Indra and has a fine sculptured elephant standing nearby. As you enter the gate, approaching from the north, you see its back first, hence its name **gajaprishtakara** (elephant's backside). The life-sized image is regarded as one of the most perfectly sculptured elephants in India.

Arjuna's Penance

HISTORIC SITE

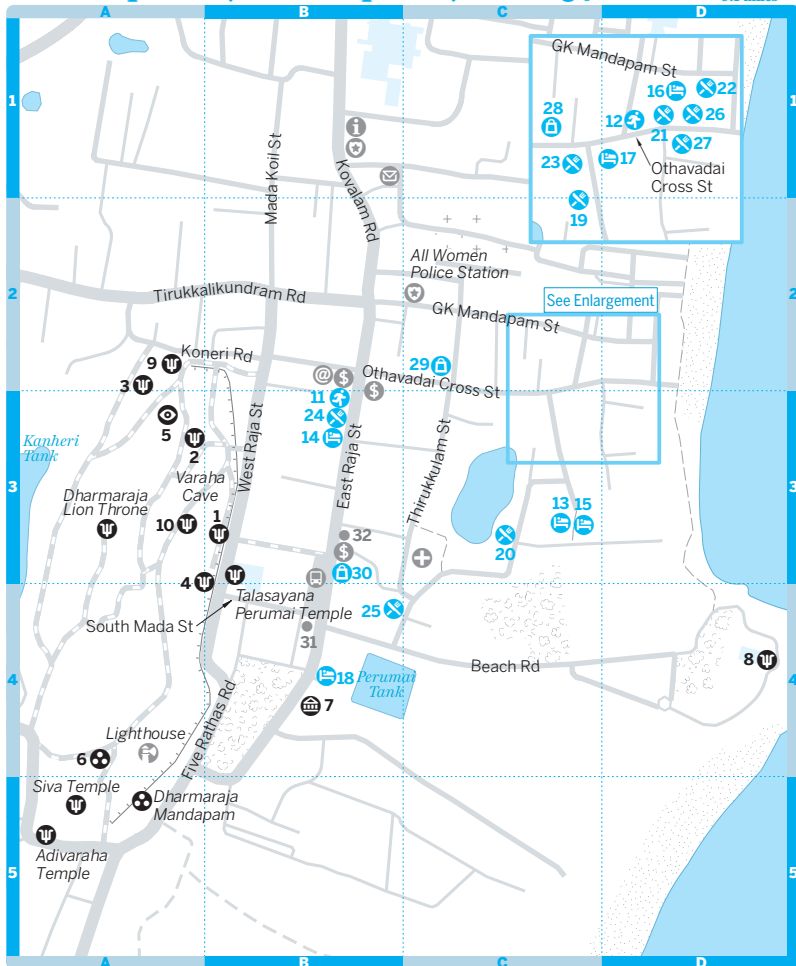
(West Raja St) As if we couldn't wax more poetic on Mamallapuram's stonework, along comes this relief carving, one of the greatest of its age and certainly one of the most convincing and unpretentious works of ancient art in India. Inscribed into a huge boulder, the penance bursts with scenes of Hindu myth (notice the *nagas*, or snake-beings, that descend a cleft once filled with water, meant to represent the Ganges) and everyday vignettes of South Indian life. A herd of elephants marches under armies of celestial beings, while Arjuna performs self-mortification so he can be granted Shiva's most powerful weapon, the god-slaying Pasupata. In Hinduism, 'penance' does not mean suffering that erases sins, but distress undertaken for the sake of boons from the gods. Another interpretation: the carving depicts the penance of the sage Bhagaritha, who asked the Ganges to fall to the earth and cleanse the ashes (and ergo, sins) of his dead relatives. There's humour amid the holy: notice the cat performing his own penance to a crowd of appreciative mice.

Ganesh Ratha & Around

HINDU TEMPLE

This *ratha* is northwest of Arjuna's Penance. Once a Shiva temple, it became a shrine to Ganesh (Shiva's elephant-headed son) after the original lingam was removed. Just north of the *ratha* is a huge boulder known as **Krishna's Butter Ball**. Immovable, but apparently balancing precariously, it's a

Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram)



favourite photo opportunity. The nearby **Kotikal Mandapam** is dedicated to Durga. Southwest of here is **Varaha Mandapam II**, dominated by an incredibly active panel of Vishnu manifested as a boar avatar. Early Hindu art is rife with depictions of Vishnu in animal form, as opposed to today, when he is primarily worshipped as Rama or Krishna, which suggests this nascent phase of Hindu theology was more closely tied to tribal religions. Nearby, the **Trimurti Cave Temple** honours the Hindu trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – with a separate section dedicated to each deity.

Mandapams

HISTORIC SITES

Mamallapuram's main hill, which dominates the town (and is in turn dominated by a red-and-brownstone lighthouse), makes for an excellent hour or two of low-key hiking (it's a good spot for the sunset as well). Many *mandapams* are scattered over this low rise of rock, including **Krishna Mandapam**, one of the earliest rock-cut temples around the region. The famous carving depicts both a rural pastiche and Krishna lifting up Govardhana mountain to protect his kinsfolk from the wrath of Indra. Other shrines include **Mahishamardini Mandapam**, just a few

Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram)

📍 Sights

- 1 Arjuna's Penance..... B3
- 2 Ganesh Ratha A3
- 3 Kotikal Mandapam A2
- 4 Krishna Mandapam A3
- 5 Krishna's Butter Ball A3
- 6 Mahishamardini Mandapam..... A4
- 7 Olakkannesvara Temple..... (see 6)
- 7 Sculpture Museum..... B4
- 8 Shore Temple D4
- 9 Trimurti Cave Temple A2
- 10 Varaha Mandapam II A3

🏠 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 11 Hi! Tours..... B3
- 12 Sri Chakra D1

🛏 Sleeping

- 13 Hotel Daphne C3
- 14 Hotel Mamalla Heritage B3
- 15 Hotel Sea Breeze..... C3
- La Vie En Rose (see 18)
- 16 New Manoj Cottage..... D1
- 17 Tina Blue View Lodge & Restaurant D1

- 18 Try Residency..... B4

🍴 Eating

- Blue Elephant (see 28)
- Dreamlands (see 21)
- 19 Freshly 'N Hot C2
- 20 Gecko Café C3
- 21 Le Yogi..... D1
- 22 Luna Magica D1
- 23 Moonrakers C1
- 24 Nilgiris Supermarket..... B3
- 25 Rose Garden B4
- 26 Santana Beach Restaurant D1
- 27 Seashore Restaurant..... D1

🛒 Shopping

- JK Bookshop..... (see 12)
- 28 Ponn Readymade Tailoring..... C1
- 29 Shriji Art Gallery C2
- 30 Southern Arts and Crafts B3

🚗 Transport

- 31 Bicycle Hire..... B4
- 32 Southern Railway Reservation Centre B3

metres southwest of the lighthouse. Scenes from the Puranas (Sanskrit stories dating from the 5th century AD) are depicted on the *mandapam*, with the sculpture of the goddess Durga considered one of the finest.

Above the *mandapam* are the remains of the 8th-century **Olakkannesvara Temple**, and spectacular views of Mamallapuram.

Sculpture Museum

MUSEUM

(East Raja St; adult/child ₹5/2, camera ₹10; ☉9.30am-5pm) This museum contains more than 3000 sculptures and paintings that run the gamut from interesting stonework to still-life depictions of fruit bowls. Parts of the building are as interesting as the exhibits.



Activities

Beach

Mamallapuram's beach, or at least the bit that fronts the village, isn't exactly pristine and gets downright dingy in some spots, but if you walk a bit north or south of the Shore Temple it clears into very fine sand. You'll also be further away from the leers of men who spend their days out here gawking at tourists. It's not a great place for swimming – there are dangerous rips – but it's possible to

go fishing in one of local outriggers; negotiate a price with the owner.

Therapies

There are numerous places offering massage, reiki, yoga and ayurvedic practices. Sessions cost around ₹400 for 30 to 45 minutes. The more upmarket hotels tend to have reliable inhouse massage options; the GRT Temple Bay hotel has a branch of the popular Chennai massage centre Ayush.

Sri Chakra (Othavada St; massage per hr ₹450; ☉9am-9pm) offers ayurvedic massage as well as yoga sessions (₹200) at 7am and 4pm, and there are many other operators in town with similar rates and timings. As always, and especially for such an intimate service, ask fellow travellers, question the massage therapist carefully and if you have any misgivings, don't proceed.



Tours

Hi! Tours (☎27443360; www.hi-tours.com; 123 East Raja St; ☉9.30am-6pm) runs bicycle tours to sights like the Tiger Cave. Tours run from 8am to 2pm and include guide and lunch; prices are around ₹350 per person. Hi! Tours also organises day trips to Kanchipuram

and Vedantagal Bird Sanctuary and fishing trips at certain times of the year.

★ Festivals & Events

The **Mamallapuram Dance Festival** (Dec-Jan) is a four-week dance festival showcasing dances from all over India, with many performances on an open-air stage against the imposing backdrop of Arjuna's Penance. Dances include the Bharata Natyam (Tamil Nadu), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh) tribal dance and Kathakali (Kerala drama); there are also puppet shows and classical music performances. Performances are held only from Friday to Sunday.

🛏 Sleeping

In addition to the following there's a cluster of cheap family-run places and budget lodges near the Five Rathas.

Hotel Mamalla Heritage HOTEL \$\$
(☎27442060; www.hotelmamallaheritage.com; 104 East Raja St; s/d from ₹1600/1800; 🍷🍷🍷) In town, this corporate-y place has large, comfortable rooms, all with fridge, spotlessly sparkling bathrooms and charmingly friendly service. The pool's a decent size, and there's a quality veg and rooftop restaurant.

Tina Blue View Lodge & Restaurant HOTEL \$
(☎27442319; 34 Othavadaí St; r ₹250-500) Tina is one of Mamallapuram's originals and kind of looks it, with some frayed and faded edges, but remains deservedly popular for its whitewashed walls, blue accents and tropically pleasant garden, as well as tireless original owner Xavier ('I am same age as Tony Wheeler!').

Ideal Beach Resort RESORT \$\$\$
(☎27442240; www.idealresort.com; s/d from ₹4500/5000; 🍷🍷🍷) With a landscaped garden setting, its own stretch of (pretty nice) beachfront and comfortable rooms or cottages, this low-key, laid-back beachfront resort is popular with families and Chennai expats. The design is small and secluded enough to have an intimate atmosphere and there's a lovely open-air poolside restaurant where live classical music is sometimes performed. It's about 3.5km north of town.

La Vie en Rose HOTEL \$
(☎9444877544; East Raja St; d from ₹450; 🍷) Simple, decent-sized and very clean rooms, friendly staff and a restaurant with some not-bad French dishes.

GRT Temple Bay RESORT \$\$\$
(☎27443636; www.radisson.com/mamallapuram; s/d incl breakfast from ₹8000/9000; 🍷🍷🍷) This is the best of the luxury resorts that lie to the north of town. It's got everything you need to feel like waterfront royalty, including 24-hour service, a spa, sauna, health club and prices that are probably a little much, all things considered. Prices jump in December/January.

Bharath Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎274434304; barathguesthouse@gmail.com; 6 Othavadaí Cross St; d from ₹400; 🍷) One of a string of similarly priced places in a row along Othavadaí Cross St (Siva Guest House and Greenlands are just as good), Bharath is painted a cheerful sunflower yellow and has big, colourful, simple rooms at a decent price.

Galaxy Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎9940171595; Othavadaí St; r ₹300-500) Central to the action, this is a family-run place with basic, clean rooms around a courtyard and flashier (ie more tackily decorated), bigger rooms upstairs.

Hotel Daphne HOTEL \$
(☎27442811; hoteldaphne1@yahoo.com; 17 Othavadaí Cross St; s/d from ₹250/350; 🍷) Part of the Moonrakers mini-empire, this place isn't the standout it used to be, but it still offers decent value for money; walls and sheets are fresh, even if the furniture isn't, and the leafy setting and rooftop garden restaurant are big drawcards.

Hotel Sea Breeze HOTEL \$\$
(☎27443035; www.nivalink.com/seabreeze; Othavadaí Cross St; r incl breakfast from ₹900; 🍷🍷) The Sea Breeze is a bland, slightly overpriced hotel of the reliably midrange beachfront-escape school of design, but the real draw is the pool, which nonguests can use for ₹150. Breakfast is free, which is too expensive for cold *idlis*.

Try Residency HOTEL \$
(☎27442728; tryresidency@gmail.com; 7 Old College Rd; r from ₹800; 🍷) Rooms aren't too stylish but they're big and clean; if you need some Western-style amenities, it's not a bad option. There's a wee garden ruled by some ducks, and the world's tiniest pool.

Guru Lodge HOTEL \$
(☎27443093; East Raja St; r from ₹300) Just outside the Othavadaí ghetto, the simple, clean, peach-coloured rooms here offer good value.

New Manoj Cottage

(☎9840387095; newmanojcottage@yahoo.com; 136 Fisherman Colony; r ₹400-600) A friendly, family-run homestay with three well-kept rooms.

HOMESTAY \$

**Eating & Drinking**

Restaurateurs near Othavadaí Cross St provide open-air ambience, decent Western mains and bland Indian curries. If you want real Indian food, there are good cheap veg places and biryani joints near the bus stand. Most places – licensed or not – serve beer, but be sensitive to the 11pm local curfew; if you persuade a restaurant to allow you to linger over drinks, it's the owner, not you, who faces a hefty fine. All places listed are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

In addition the places reviewed here, beachside and nearly beachside Dreamlands, Seashore Restaurant, Santana Beach Restaurant and Luna Magica, are all recommended for fresh seafood; you'll get a good plate of fish for around ₹150 to ₹200.

Self-caterers should head to **Nilgiris Supermarket** (East Raja St; ☎9.30am-9pm), between Othavadaí St and the bus stand.

**Gecko Café**

(www.gecko-web.com; off Othavadaí Cross St; mains ₹100-200) Two friendly brothers run this cute little spot on a thatched-covered rooftop above the family home. The menu choices and prices aren't that different to other tourist-oriented spots, but there's more love put into the cooking here, and the decor is fun: we liked the wall of goddesses, with Laxmi hanging next to the Virgin and Child. There's internet and a book exchange downstairs.

MULTICUISINE \$\$

Le Yogi

(Othavadaí St; mains ₹90-160) This is some of the best Western food in town; the steaks, pastas and pizzas are genuine and tasty (if small), service is good, and the airy dining area, with wooden accents and flickering candlelight, is romantic as all get out.

MULTICUISINE \$\$

Rose Garden

(Beach Rd; mains around ₹50) This is one of the better biryani shops in a town that's surprisingly full of joints serving this tasty Hyderabad rice dish.

INDIAN \$

Freshly 'N Hot

(Othavadaí Cross St; mains ₹50-180) Yes, the name makes no sense. A comparatively small menu of perfectly OK pizza, pasta and

CAFE \$\$

sandwiches, and a long, long list of coffees, hot and cold. The ice coffees are excellent.

Moonrakers

(34 Othavadaí St; mains ₹60-150) Like it or not, you're likely to end up here at some stage; it's the sort of place that magnetises travellers and dominates the backpacker-ghetto streetscape. Food is OK, ambience is better and beer is enjoyable from the top-floor veranda. It's a mystery why the opposite-facing Blue Elephant, with almost identical food and nicer decor, isn't as popular as Moonrakers, though they both get pretty packed out with visitors from Chennai on weekend evenings.

MULTICUISINE \$\$

**Shopping**

Mamallapuram wakes to the sound of sculptors' chisels on granite, and you'll inevitably be approached by someone trying to sell you everything from a ₹100 stone pendant to a ₹400,000 Ganesh that needs to be lifted with a crane. There are lots of good art galleries, tailors and antique shops here. For clothes, we recommend **Ponn Readymade Tailoring** (Othavadaí St). Nice prints, cards and original art can be found at **Shriji Art Gallery** (11/1 Othavadaí St) and expensive but beautiful curios culled from local homes at **Southern Arts and Crafts** (☎27443675; www.southernarts.in; 72 East Raja St).

A number of shops have books for sale or exchange. **JK Bookshop** (☎9880552200; 143 Othavadaí St; ☎9am-12.30pm & 2-8.30pm) is a small bookshop where you can buy or swap books in several languages, including English, French and German. Proceeds support education for local 'untouchable' children.

**Information**

Internet access is everywhere.

Indian Overseas Bank ATM (East Raja St)

KK Netscape (East Raja St; per hr ₹30; ☎9am-10pm)

Ruby Forex (East Raja St; ☎9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat)

South India Browsing Centre (Mango Leaf restaurant, Othavadaí St; per hr ₹30; ☎8am-8pm) Also has a decent book exchange.

State Bank of India ATM (East Raja St)

Suradeep Hospital (☎27442390; 15 Thirukulam St; ☎24hr) Recommended by travellers.

Tourist office (☎27442232; Kovalam Rd; ☎10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Staff treat visitors as a major inconvenience; someone will probably sigh and point you to a table of maps and brochures.

i Getting There & Away

There are at least 30 buses a day running to/from Chennai (₹30, two hours, 30 daily). To Chennai Airport take bus 108B (₹25, two hours, 9am and 8pm daily). There are also at least nine daily buses to Puducherry (₹35, two hours), and Kanchipuram (₹24, two hours) via Tirukkalikundram; there's a faster direct private bus to Kanchipuram daily at 6am. Two daily buses run to Tiruvannamalai (₹36, three hours, 9.30am and 8pm)

Taxis are available from the bus station. Long-distance trips require plenty of bargaining. It's about ₹1400 to Chennai or the airport.

You can make train reservations at the **South-ern Railway Reservation Centre** (East Raja St).

i Getting Around

The easiest way to get around is on foot, though on a hot day it's quite a hike to see all the monuments. Bicycles can be rented through most guesthouses and at numerous stalls along East Raja St.

Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary

Located about 52km southwest of Mamallapuram, this wildlife **sanctuary** (admission ₹20; ☀6am-6pm) is an important breeding ground for waterbirds – cormorants, egrets, herons, ibises, spoonbills, storks, grebes and pelicans – that migrate here from October to March. At the height of breeding season (December and January) there can be up to 30,000 birds nesting in the mangroves. The best viewing times are early morning and late afternoon; head for the watchtower and look down on the noisy nests across the water.

Basic rooms are available at the **Forest Department Resthouse** (d ₹525, with AC ₹725), 500m before the sanctuary. You're supposed to book in advance with the **Wildlife Warden's Office** (WWO; Map p986; ☎22351471; 4th fl, DMS office, 259 Anna Salai, Teynampet) in Chennai – it's not easy, and do phone first as there was talk of the office moving at the time of research. It can be easier through a tour operator (such as Hi! Tours in Mamallapuram), or if you turn up the caretaker may just find a room if one's available. You may or may not be offered food if you arrive unexpectedly; if you have transport, it's 10km or so to the nearest evening food stall.

To get here by public transport, first get to Chengalpattu, an hour's bus ride from Ma-

mallapuram. From here you can take a bus to Vedantangal via Padalam, where you may have to change buses at the road junction. Most Vedantangal buses go directly to the sanctuary entrance, others to the village bus station, from where the sanctuary is a 1km walk south. Visitors also often make a day trip by AC taxi from Mamallapuram; this should cost around ₹1400.

Kanchipuram

☎044 / POP 188,763

The old capital of the Pallava dynasty is a typical Tamil Nadu temple town: modern India at her frenetic best dappled with houses of worship that form a veritable dialogue with history in stone. Kanchi (as it's often called) is also a centre of silk production and famed for its high-quality saris. It's usually (and best) visited as a day trip from Mamallapuram or Chennai, as there's not a lot to see outside of the justifiably famous temples. Don't make a special trip just to shop, as silk is generally no cheaper here than in Chennai.

The city is on the main road between Chennai and Bengaluru (Bangalore), 76km southwest of Chennai. There's no tourist office, but for information online check out www.hellokanchipuram.com.

i Sights

All temples are open from 6am to 12.30pm and 4pm to 8.30pm. All have free admission, though you may have to pay for shoe-keeping and/or to bring in a camera.

Kailasanatha Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

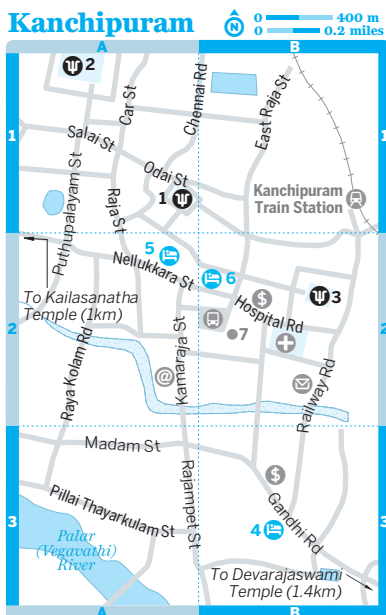
The oldest temple in Kanchi is the most impressive, not for its size but weight of historical presence. Dedicated to Shiva, the Kailasanatha Temple was built by the Pallava king Rajasimha in the 7th century. The low-slung sandstone compound has fascinating carvings, including many half-animal deities that were in vogue during the period of early Dravidian architecture.

Non-Hindus are allowed into the inner sanctum here, where there is a prismatic lingam – the largest in town and third-largest in Asia.

Sri Ekambaranathar Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

This Shiva temple is one of the largest in the city, covering 12 hectares and dominated by a 59m-high *gopuram*. The carvings feel alive and beautiful, but still weighted with five centuries of history; they were chiselled



by artisans in 1509 during the Vijayanagar empire. The temple's name is said to derive from Eka Amra Nathar – Lord of the Mango Tree – and there is an old mango tree, with four branches representing the four Vedas (sacred Hindu texts) on-site. Of the five elemental temples of Shiva, this is the shrine of Earth.

According to legend, the goddess Kamakshi worshipped Shiva here in the form of a linga made of sand, which still lies at the heart of the temple. Non-Hindus cannot see the mirror chamber, where worshippers enter with candles. The central image of Shiva is reflected in the candlelight across the mirrored walls, creating countless images of the god that allude to his infinite presence.

Kamakshi Amman Temple HINDU TEMPLE

This imposing temple is dedicated to the goddess Parvati in her guise as Kamakshi (She Whose Eyes Awaken Desire). To the right of the temple's entrance is the marriage hall, with wonderful ornate pillars, and directly ahead is the main shrine topped with a golden *vimana* (legendary flying chariot). Again, non-Hindus cannot enter the sanctum, where Kamakshi/Parvati is depicted, uncharacteristically, in the lotus position. Each February/March carriages housing statues of the temple deities are hauled

Kanchipuram

Sights

- 1 Kamakshi Amman Temple A1
- 2 Sri Ekambaranathar Temple A1
- 3 Vaikunta Perumal Temple B2

Sleeping

- 4 GRT Regency B3
- 5 MM Hotel A2
- 6 Sri Sakthi Residency B2

Eating

- Dakshin..... (see 4)
Saravana Bhavan..... (see 4)

Transport

- 7 Bicycle Rental B2

through the streets; this procession should not be missed if you're in the vicinity.

Devarajaswami Temple HINDU TEMPLE

(camera/video ₹5/100) Dedicated to Vishnu, this enormous monument was built by the Vijayanagars and is among the most impressive of Kanchipuram's temples. It has a beautifully sculptured '1000-pillared' hall (admission ₹1; only 96 of the original 1000 remain) as well as a marriage hall commemorating the wedding of Vishnu and Lakshmi. One of the temple's most notable features is a huge chain carved from a single piece of stone, which can be seen at each corner of the *mandapam*. The temple is supposedly the place to go to receive cures from lizard-related illnesses, thanks to twin silver- and gold-plated reptiles that crawl over the temple ceiling.

Every 40 years the waters of the temple tank are drained, revealing a huge wooden statue of Vishnu that is worshipped for 48 days. You may like to hang around for the next viewing – in 2019. Otherwise, float festivals (when deities are literally floated across the reservoir) are held on the tank three times a year.

Vaikunta Perumal Temple HINDU TEMPLE

Roughly 1200 years old and dedicated to Vishnu, this temple was built shortly after the Kailasanatha. The cloisters inside the outer wall consist of lion pillars and are representative of the first phase in the architectural evolution of the grand 1000-pillared halls. The main shrine, which is uniquely spread over three levels, contains images of Vishnu standing, sitting, reclining and riding his preferred mount, the garuda (half-eagle,

half-man). There's another monitor lizard icon here.

Sleeping & Eating

Kanchi's cheap pilgrims' lodges are shabby, but there are a few decent midrange options.

GRT Regency

HOTEL \$\$

(☎27225250; www.grthotels.com; 487 Gandhi Rd; s/d incl breakfast ₹2250/2750; 🍷🍷) Set back from the noisy main road, this place probably has the cleanest and most comfortable rooms you'll find in Kanchi. The attached **Dakshin** restaurant (mains ₹180 to ₹375) is a tad overpriced but is a plush AC spot that offers a big multicuisine menu including Western-style breakfast, good seafood (especially the Indian dishes) and tasty tandoori.

Sri Sakthi Residency

HOTEL \$

(☎27233799; www.sreesakthiresidency.com; 71 Nellukkara St; s/d from ₹800/900; 🍷) Not bad value; simple blonde-wood furniture and coloured walls make the rooms fairly modern, with only a touch of fraying round the edges. There's a fine veg restaurant under the hotel.

MM Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎27227250; www.mmhotels.com; 65 Nellukkara St; d from ₹800; 🍷) A busy and clean hotel, with shiny floors and flatscreen TVs, frequented by Indian businesspeople. A Saravana Bhavan veg restaurant is next door, with a welcome AC dining room.

Information

Axis Bank ATM (Gandhi Rd)

Googly (144 Kamaraja St; per hr ₹20; ☎7.30am-10.30pm) Internet access.

State Bank of India ATM (Hospital Rd)

Getting There & Away

Regular suburban trains direct to Kanchipuram leave from Beach, Fort or Egmore stations in Chennai. The busy bus stand is in the centre of town. Destinations from the bus stand include:

Bengaluru ₹110 to ₹160, six hours, two daily

Chennai ₹26, two hours, every 15 minutes

Mamallapuram ₹27, two hours, nine daily

Puducherry ₹36, three hours, 12 daily

Tiruvannamalai ₹38, three hours, hourly

Trichy ₹110, seven hours, four daily

Vellore ₹26, two hours, every 15 minutes

Getting Around

Bicycles can be hired from stalls around the bus stand. An autorickshaw for a half-day tour of the

five main temples (around ₹400) will inevitably involve a stop at a silk shop.

Vellore

☎0416 / POP 386,746

For a dusty bazaar town, Vellore feels kinda cosmopolitan, thanks to a couple of tertiary institutions and the Christian Medical College (CMC) Hospital, one of the finest hospitals in India. The hospital attracts international medical students as well as patients from all over India, and the town is worth a day for soaking up both its historical ambience – the massive Vijayanagar fort rewards a wander – and small-town-but-international vibe. The new Sripuram Golden Temple, just out of town, draws pilgrims from all over India.

Sights

Sripuram Golden Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Mahalakshmi Temple; admission free) This controversial temple (it was built just a few years ago with 1½ tons of gold on the roof, and some have questioned whether the money could have been better spent) is in a lovely garden setting 7km south of town, and is popular with pilgrims; there's a certain thrill in seeing all that carved gold up close. There's a huge security presence, with no electronic items allowed inside the gates (your bag will be searched and screened), as well as an enforced dress code (no shorts, no legs or shoulders on display), and you have to keep strictly to the roped-off walkway that's lined with quotes from the temple's guru and strident calls for donations. You can pay ₹250 to walk straight in, otherwise there are long queues in hot caged corridors. Buses (₹8) run regularly from the New Bus Stand; an autorickshaw costs ₹80.

Vellore Fort

FORT COMPLEX

The solid walls and dry moat of the splendid Vellore Fort dominate the west side of town. It was built in the 16th century and passed briefly into the hands of the Marathas in 1676 and the Mughals in 1708. The British occupied the fort in 1760 following the fall of Srirangapatnam and the death of Tipu Sultan. These days it houses various government offices, parade grounds, a university, a church, an ancient mosque and a police recruiting school.

At the west side of the fort complex, the small **Archeological Survey Museum** (admission free; ☎9am-5pm Sat-Thu) contains

sculptures dating back to Pallava and Chola times. Next door, pretty **St John's Church** (1846) is only open for Sunday services. On the east side, the **Government Museum** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☎9.30am-5pm Sat-Thu) displays hero stones in the forecourt dating from the 8th century and depicting the stories of war heroes in battle. The dusty exhibits have seen much better days, but the small collection of tribal clothes and artefacts is interesting.

Near the fort entrance, **Jalakanteshwara Temple** (☎6am-1pm & 3-8.30pm), a gem of late Vijayanagar architecture, was built about 1566. Check out the small, detailed sculptures on the walls of the marriage hall. For many years the temple was occupied by garrisons and temple rituals ceased. Now it's once again a place of worship after it was reconsecrated in the mid-1980s.

Sleeping & Eating

Vellore's cheap hotels are concentrated along the roads south of and parallel to the hospital, mostly catering to people in town for treatment. The cheapest are pretty grim, and there's not much at the top end, but Vellore's your city when it comes to bland rooms in the space between budget and midrange.

Darling Residency HOTEL \$\$ (☎2213001; darling_residency@yahoo.com; 11/8 Officer's Line; s/d from ₹1400/1700; ☎☎☎) It's no five-star, but rooms are clean and comfortable (if forgettable), staff are friendly and there's even a small fitness room with exercise bike. The rooftop **Aranya Roof Garden Restaurant** (open lunch and dinner) is cool and breezy.

Hotel Palm Tree HOTEL \$ (☎2222960; hotelpalmtree@yahoo.in; 10 Thennamaram Rd; s/d from ₹850/950; ☎☎) Down a lane just off Officer's Line, not far south of the fort. Rooms are clean and spruce, with IKEA-style furniture and coloured feature walls, and staff are helpful.

Ismail Residency HOTEL \$ (☎2223216; Ida Scudder Rd (Arcot Rd); s/d from ₹600/700; ☎) A five-room lodge with clean rooms that are a tad bigger than others along this stretch.

Hotel River View HOTEL \$\$ (☎2225251; Katpadi Rd; d from ₹1000; ☎) North of the town centre and close to the New Bus Stand, this hotel benefits from a relatively

quiet location and pleasant gardens, but the 'river view' is hardly that. Rooms are spacious, and the restaurants are both good, but service is odd-to-rude and bathroom cleaning isn't quite up to scratch for these prices.

Meher Hotel HOTEL \$ (☎2220992; Ida Scudder Rd; s/d ₹600/700) Right across from the hospital entrance, this is one of a string of similarly priced places with smallish, clean, undecorated rooms that get a bit of street noise.

Hotel Arthy INDIAN \$ (Ida Scudder Rd; mains ₹10-50) A bunch of cheap veg restaurants line Ida Scudder Rd, but this place is one of the cleanest, with tasty South Indian favourites plus cheap-and-yummy biryani; the rather good 'special thali' is ₹50.

Information

There are several internet cafes around town, including a few opposite the hospital on Ida Scudder Rd (Arcot Rd).

Axis Bank ATM (Officer's Line) A couple of blocks south of the fort.

Geo Wings Internet (Ida Scudder Rd; per hr ₹30; ☎9am-9pm)

State Bank of India ATM (Bangalore Rd) There's another ATM a couple of blocks north of the hospital on Katpadi Rd.

Tourist office (Vellore Fort; ☎10am-1pm & 2-2.30pm Mon-Fri)

UAE Exchange (Ida Scudder Rd; ☎9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Foreign exchange, in the same building as the Meher Hotel.

Getting There & Away

Bus

The New Bus Stand is about 500m from the Hotel River View, 1.5km to the north of town. AC Volvo buses run 12 times a day to Chennai (₹145). Government bus services from the New Bus Stand include:

Chennai ₹54, three daily, every 15 minutes

Bengaluru ₹87, five daily, every 30 minutes

Kanchipuram ₹26, two hours, every 15 minutes

Tiruvannamalai ₹38, two hours, every 30 minutes

Trichy ₹120, seven hours, three daily

Train

Vellore's main train station is 5km north at Katpadi. Bus 192 shuttles between the station and town. There are at least six daily express trains to/from Chennai Central (2nd class/sleeper ₹76/133).

Tiruvannamalai

☑ 04175 / POP 130,567

There are temple towns, there are mountain towns, and there are temple-mountain towns where God appears as a phallus of fire. Welcome to Tiruvannamalai. About 85km south of Vellore and flanked by boulder-strewn Mt Arunachala, this is one of the five 'elemental' cities of Shiva; here the god is worshipped in his fire incarnation as Arunachaleswar (see boxed text, p1012). At each full moon Mt Arunachala swells with thousands of pilgrims who circumnavigate the base of the mountain, but at any time you'll see Shaivite priests, sadhus (spiritual men) and devotees gathered around the temple. Tiruvannamalai is also home to the Sri Ramana (also known as Sri Ramanasramam) Ashram.

Budget and spiritual-minded travellers who see the Mamallapuram scene as played out are increasingly making their way here; in the streets near the ashram you'll find a few congenial cafes and hotels, and the ubiquitous Kashmiri souvenir shops.

👁 Sights & Activities

Arunachaleswar Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(☀5am-12.30pm & 3.30-9pm) The Arunachaleswar is awash in golden flames and the roasting scent of burning ghee, as befits the fire incarnation of the Destroyer of the Universe. Covering some 10 hectares, this vast temple is one of the largest in India. Four large unpainted *gopurams*, one for each cardinal point, front the approaches, with the eastern tower rising 13 storeys and an astonishing 66m.

You enter Arunachaleswar through concentric rings of profanity evolving into sa-

credness, from the outer wall of beggars and merchants, past dark corridors recessed with jewelled gods and, finally, into the heart of the temple, where a roaring oven that looks like a walnut shell spewing fire is tended by temple Brahmins in front of a lingam. *Puja* is performed about seven times daily; a notice displays the times. This is a remarkably hassle-free temple to wander through.

Mt Arunachala

MOUNTAIN

Known as Sonachalam (Red Mountain) in Sanskrit, this 800m-high extinct volcano dominates Tiruvannamalai and local conceptions of the element of fire, which supposedly finds its sacred abode in Arunachala's heart. On full-moon and festival days, thousands of pilgrims circumnavigate the 14km base of the mountain. If you're not quite that devoted, an autorickshaw will take you around for about ₹200 if things are quiet, or up to double that on festival days. An alternative is to pick up a circle map from the ashram office, hire a bicycle from the road near the entrance and ride your way around.

You can make a sort of phallus pilgrimage here by visiting eight famous linga dotted around the mountain's cardinal and subcardinal spokes. Also, watch out for the field of a thousand lingam, 'planted' by domestic and overseas donators from Malaysia to the USA.

For a superb view of the Arunachaleswar Temple, climb part or all the way up the hill (about four hours return). There's a signed path that leads up through village homes near the northwest corner of the temple, passing two caves, **Virupaksha** and **Skandasramam**. Sri Ramana Maharshi lived and meditated in these caves for more than 20 years from 1899 to 1922, after which he and his growing band of spiritual followers established the ashram.

THE LINGAM OF FIRE

Legend has it that Shiva appeared as a column of fire on Mt Arunachala, creating the original symbol of the lingam. Each November/December full moon, the **Karthikai Deepam Festival** celebrates this legend throughout India but becomes particularly significant at Tiruvannamalai. Here, a huge fire, lit from a 30m wick immersed in 2000L of ghee, blazes from the top of Mt Arunachala for days. In homes, lamps honour Shiva and his fiery lingam. The fire symbolises Shiva's light, which eradicates darkness and evil.

At festival time up to half a million people come to Tiruvannamalai. In honour of Shiva, they scale the mountain or circumnavigate its base. On the upward path, steps quickly give way to jagged and unstable rocks. There's no shade, the sun is relentless and the journey must be undertaken in bare feet – a mark of respect to the deity. None of this deters the thousands of pilgrims who quietly and joyfully make their way to the top and the abode of their deity.

Sri Ramana Ashram

ASHRAM

(☎237200; www.sriramanamaharshi.org; ☺office 7.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm) This tranquil ashram, 2km southwest of Tiruvannamalai, draws devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, a guru who died in 1950 after nearly 50 years in contemplation. It's a very relaxed place, set in green surrounds, where visitors are able to meditate or worship the shrine where the guru achieved samadhi (conscious exit from the body). Day visits are permitted but *devotees only* may stay at the ashram by applying in writing (email is acceptable), preferably at least three months in advance.

👉 Tours

Bougainvillea Tours (☎9500325159; www.bougainvilleatours.com) offers a range of guided walks around the mountain and to the temples, as well as a bullock-cart circumnavigation of the mountain. Full-moon pilgrimage tours are also run from Chennai by the TTDC (p998).

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

Tiruvannamalai can be visited as a day trip from Puducherry or Chennai, but more and more travellers are staying on. There are budget lodges around the temple, but quality is generally lacking. During festival time (November/December) prices can rise by a staggering 1000%.

Arunachala Ramana Home

HOTEL \$

(☎236120; www.arunachalaramanahome.com; 70 Ramana Nagar, Chengam Rd; s/d from ₹300/400, d with AC ₹700; 🏠) Basic, clean and friendly, this popular place is not far from the ashram. Next door is the excellent Manna Cafe, which answers any need for non-Indian food, including salads, pasta and bread. Plenty of chai stalls and veg cafes are nearby.

Hotel Ganesh

HOTEL \$

(☎2226701; 111A Big St; d ₹275-₹605; 🏠) On the busy bazaar road running along the north side of the temple, Ganesh is a little haven of peace and value. Some rooms are poky, but they're clean enough and the inner courtyard balcony is pleasant. There's a decent veg restaurant downstairs.

Hotel Arunachala Residency

HOTEL \$

(☎228300; www.hotelarunachala.com; 5 Vada Sannathi St; s/d/tr from ₹400/600/750; 🏠) The best of the temple-adjacent hotels, this place right next to the main temple entrance is clean and fine with pretensions to luxury apparent in the marblesque floors and ugly

furniture. The veg restaurant downstairs has simple, very good, South Indian dishes. It's a much better option than the inexplicably popular Hotel Ramakrishna, nearby on the highway, which has run-down rooms at similar prices.

Shanti Internet Café

CAFE \$

(www.shanticafe.com; 115 Chengam Rd; 📶) Near the ashram. A popular, relaxed spot with cushion seating on the floor and a small menu of sandwiches, salads, shakes and cakes. There's internet access downstairs (per hour ₹25) and wi-fi in the cafe.

📍 Getting There & Away

There are buses every half-hour to Chennai (₹66, 3½ hours) and Vellore (₹38, two hours). There are at least three daily buses to Puducherry (₹40, three hours). A taxi to Puducherry (via Gingee) costs around ₹1500 return, or ₹900 one way.

Only local passenger trains use Tiruvannamalai train station – two trains a day pass through between Vellore and Villupuram (where you can change for Puducherry).

Gingee (Senji)

☎04145

Somewhere 37km east of Tiruvannamalai, nature sprinkled a smattering of marbles – rounded boulders and lumpy rocks – in shades of grey, brown and red over the flat green paddies of Tamil Nadu. Then man turned two of these stony protrusions into the **Rajagiri & Krishnagiri** (King & Queen Fort; Indian/foreigner ₹5/150; ☀9am-5pm). Constructed mainly in the 16th century by the Vijayanagars (though some structures date from the 13th century), these edifices, which poke out of the Tamil plain like castles misplaced by the *Lord of the Rings*, have been occupied by the Marathas, the Mughals, the French and, finally, the British.

It's a good hike to the top of either fort, but along the way you'll pass through several monuments, from *gopurams* to granaries. A walk around will take half a day, especially if you cross the road and make the steep ascent to Krishnagiri. Buildings within Rajagiri (on the south side of the road) include a Shiva temple, a mosque and – most prominent – the restored audience hall. Almost all have been marred by graffiti.

It's easy to day trip to Gingee from Puducherry (67km) or Tiruvannamalai (37km). Buses leave every 30 minutes from

Tiruvannamalai (₹13, 1½ hours). Ask to be let off at 'the fort', 2km before Gingee town. An autorickshaw from Gingee to the fort costs about ₹90 one way.

Puducherry (Pondicherry)

📍0413 / POP 220,749

Let's get something clear: if you came to Puducherry (which used to be called Pondicherry and is almost always referred to as 'Pondy') expecting a Provençal village in South India, you're in for some sore disappointment, *mon ami*. Most of Pondy is Tamil Nadu: honk-scream-screch-honk-chaos Tamil Nadu. Running through this is a thin trickle of colonial Pondy: some cobblestones, mustard-yellow townhouses, and here and there a shady boulevard that could put you in mind of gendarmes marching past sariclad belles – HONK!

On top of everything are hotels, restaurants and 'lifestyle' shops that sell a vision of *vieux Asie* created by savvy entrepreneurs and embellished by Gallic creative types who arrived here on the French hippie trail. Their presence has in turn attracted Indian artists and designers, and thus, Pondy's vibe: less faded colonial *ville*, more contemporary bohemian, vaguely New Age – but also faintly Old World – node on the international travel trail.

Enjoy the shopping, the French food (hello steak!), the beer (goodbye Tamil Nadu alcohol taxes – Pondy is a Union Territory) and, if you like, yoga and meditation at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

Puducherry is split from east to west by a partially covered sewer...we mean, canal. The more 'French' part of town is on the east side (towards the sea), the more typically Indian portion to the west. Nehru St and Lal Bahadur Sastri, better known as Rue Bussy, are the main east-west streets; Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd and Mission St (Cathedral St) are the north-south thoroughfares. Pondy's grid design makes it relatively easy to follow, although many streets have one name at one end and another at the other, while others use the French 'Rue' instead of 'Street'.

🗨 Sights & Activities

French Quarter

OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pocketed away in the eastern alleys are a series of cobbled roads, white and mustard buildings in various states of romantic *déshabillé*, and a slight sense of Gallic glory

gone by, otherwise known as the French Quarter. The best way to explore these streets is via Puducherry's **heritage walk**. Start at the north end of Goubert Ave, the seafront promenade, and wander south past the **French consulate** and the **Gandhi Statue**. Turn right at the **Hôtel de Ville** (Town Hall) on Rue Mahe Labourdonnais, past the shady **Bharathi Park**. From there it's a matter of pottering south through Dumas, Romain Rolland and Suffren Sts. You may also want to take a look down Vysial St, between MG Rd and Mission St; locals say this tree-lined block is one of the last faithfully maintained slices of old Pondy.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram

ASHRAM

(cnr Marine & Manakula Vinayagar Koil Sts) Founded in 1926 by Sri Aurobindo and a French woman known as 'the Mother' (whose visage is *everywhere* here), this ashram seeks to synthesise yoga and modern science. After Aurobindo's death, spiritual authority (and minor religious celebrity) passed to the Mother, who died in 1973 aged 97. A constant flow of visitors files through the **main ashram building** (☉8am-noon & 2-5pm), which has the flower-festooned samadhi of Aurobindo and the Mother in the central courtyard. Opening hours are longer for guests of any of the ashram's accommodation around the town.

Puducherry Museum

MUSEUM

(15 St Louis St; adult/child ₹2/1; ☉9.40am-1pm & 2-5.20pm Tue-Sun) Goodness knows how this cute little museum keeps its artefacts from rotting, considering there's a whole floor of French-era furniture sitting in the South Indian humidity. As you amble through the colonial-era building, keep an eye peeled for Pallava and Chola sculptures, French Union-era bric-a-brac, and coins and shards of pottery excavated from Arikamedu, a once-major seaport a few kilometres south of Puducherry that traded with the Roman Empire during the 1st century BC.

Churches

CHURCHES

Puducherry has one of the best collections of over-the-top cathedrals in India. *Merci*, French missionaries. The **Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception** (Mission St), completed in 1791, is a robin's-egg-blue-and-cloud-white typically Jesuit edifice, while the brown-and-white grandiosity of the **Sacred Heart Church** (Subbayah Salai) is set off by stained glass and a Gothic sense of proportion. The mellow pink-and-cream **Notre Dame de Anges** (Dumas St), built in

1858, looks sublime in the late-afternoon light. The smooth limestone interior was made using eggshells in the plaster.

Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple HINDU TEMPLE (Manakula Vinayagar Koil St; ☎5.45am-12.30pm & 4-9.30pm) Pondy may have more churches than most towns, but this is still India, and the Hindu faith still reigns supreme. Don't miss the chance to watch tourists, pilgrims and the curious get a head pat from the temple elephant who stands outside Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple, dedicated to Ganesh and tucked down a backstreet just south of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The temple also contains over 40 skillfully painted friezes.

Botanical Gardens GARDEN (admission free; ☎10am-5pm) Established by the French in 1826, the botanical gardens form a green, if somewhat litter-strewn, oasis on the southwest side of town.

Beaches BEACHES Pondy is a seaside town, but that doesn't make it a beach destination; the city's sand is a thin strip of dirty brown blah that slurps into a seawall of jagged rocks. With that said, Goubert Ave (Beach Rd) is a killer stroll, especially at dawn and dusk when everyone in town takes a constitutional or romantic stroll. There are a few decent beaches to the north and south of town. Quiet, Reppo and Serenity Beaches are all north of the centre, within 8km of Puducherry. Chunnambar, 8km south, has Paradise Beach, water sports and backwater boat cruises. Both areas are becoming inundated with high-end resorts. The tourist office has details.

Yoga Puducherry has an annual International Yoga Festival. **Ayurvedic Holistic Healing Centre** (☎6537651; 6 Sengeniammal Koil St) performs detox services, back procedures, varna point massage, skin treatment, and offers ayurvedic massages and yoga courses. You can practise (and study) yoga at Sri Aurobindo Ashram. **International Centre for Yoga Education & Research** (ICYER; ☎2241561; www.icyer.com; 16A Mettu St, Chinnamudaliarchavady, Kottukuppam), also known as the Ananda Ashram, conducts annual six-month yoga teacher-training courses and 10-day introductory summer courses (€500, including food and lodging).

Tours

The local tourist office runs half-day sight-seeing tours (₹100 to ₹150, 1.30pm to 5pm)

to the Sacred Heart Church, Auroville and Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Full-day tours (₹200 to ₹250, 9.45am to 5pm) cover the same area plus the botanical gardens, Puducherry Museum, Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple and the Chunnambar water sports complex.

Shanti Tours (Romain Rolland St; ☎8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) offers recommended two-hour **walking tours** (per person ₹200) of Puducherry with informed, multi-lingual guides.

Festivals & Events

International Yoga Festival YOGA (4-7 Jan) Puducherry's ashrams and yoga culture are put on show with workshops, classes, and music and dance events. Held throughout the city, the event attracts yoga masters from all over India.

Bastille Day PARADE (14 Jul) Street parades and a bit of French pomp and ceremony are all part of the fun at this celebration.

Sleeping

If you've been saving for a special occasion, splurge here, because Puducherry's lodgings are as good as South India gets. Local heritage houses manage to combine colonial romanticism with modern spoilage and, dare we say, French playfulness, like vintage movie posters and colour schemes that run from monochrome to neon-bright; these same rooms are likely to run to hundreds of dollars in the West.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram runs a lot of local budget accommodation. The lodgings are clean and you'll be around like-minded souls (ie the budget – and karma – conscious). But they come with rules: 10.30pm curfew and no smoking or alcohol. For information and reservations, contact the **Sri Aurobindo information centre** (☎2233604; bureaucentral@sriurobindoashram.org; Cottage Complex, cnr Rangapillai St & Ambour Salai; ☎6am-8pm).

It's smart to book ahead if you plan on arriving at a weekend; hotels tend to fill up with Indian tourists.

Calve

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2224261; www.calve.in; 36 Vysial St; r incl breakfast ₹3555-5355; ☎) This excellent heritage option, located on a quiet, tree-shaded boulevard, combines a soaring sense of high-ceilinged space with egg-white walls, wooden shutters, flat-screen TVs, huge niche-embedded mattresses and a warm backdrop

Puducherry (Pondicherry)



of Burmese teak floors and banisters. Add gorgeous tiled floors, beautiful furniture and big baths, and you've got a winner.

Dumas Guest House BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎2225726; www.dumasguesthouse.com; 36 Dumas St; d from ₹2000; 🍷) All whitewash and dark wood, this antique-filled heritage option has real personality. Enjoy the carved doors, quiet gardens, slight quirkiness in the decor and very friendly multilingual staff.

Les Hibiscus BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎2227480; www.leshibiscus.com; 49 Suffren St; d incl breakfast ₹2500; 🍷📍) Not dissimilar to the

Dumas in its white-and-wood heritage style, Hibiscus has just four high-ceilinged rooms with gorgeous antique beds and flatscreen TVs. Travellers have raved about the friendly, helpful owner, and the tasty complimentary breakfast that will set you up for the day.

Kailash Guest House HOTEL \$
 (☎2224485; www.kailashguesthouse.in; cnr Vysial & Mission Sts; s/d from ₹500/750; 🍷) The best value for money in this price range; Kailash has simple, super-clean rooms and friendly management. It's geared to traveller needs, with communal areas, shared fridge and clothes-drying facilities, and bike rental.

Puducherry (Pondicherry)

📍 Sights

- 1 Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception B2
- 2 Gandhi Statue D3
- 3 Notre Dame de Agnes D4
- 4 Puducherry Museum D2
- 5 Sacred Heart Church A5
- 6 Sri Aurobindo Ashram D1
- 7 Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple C1

🛏 Sleeping

- 8 Ajantha Beach Guest House D4
- 9 Calve B1
- 10 Dumas Guest House C5
- 11 Hotel De L'Orient C4
- 12 Hotel de Pondichery C5
- 13 Kailash Guest House C1
- 14 Les Hibiscus C5
- Lotus Bay View Hotel (see 8)
- 15 New Guest House C5
- 16 Park Guest House D5
- 17 Raj Lodge B2
- 18 Santhi Inn C2
- Sri Aurobindo Information Centre (see 41)
- 19 Villa Helena C4

🍴 Eating

- 20 Baker St B4
- 21 Café de Flore C5
- 22 Café des Artes C4
- 23 kasha ki aasha C3

- 24 La Terrasse C5
- 25 Le Café D3
- Le Club (see 12)
- 26 Nilgiris Supermarket B2
- Salle a Manger (see 9)
- 27 Saravana Bhavan B1
- 28 Satsanga C5
- 29 Surguru C2

🍷 Drinking

- 30 L'e-Space Coffee & Arts C4

🛍 Shopping

- 31 Fabindia C5
- 32 Focus Books B2
- 33 French Bookshop C5
- 34 Geethanjali C4
- 35 Hidesign C2
- 36 Kalki B1
- kasha ki aasha (see 23)
- 37 La Boutique d'Auroville C1
- 38 Libraire Kailash A4
- Pondy Cre'rt (see 31)

📍 Information

- 39 Alliance Française C5
- 40 Shanti Travels C4
- 41 Sri Aurobindo Information Centre C2
- 42 Thomas Cook C4

🚗 Transport

- 43 Bicycle & Scooter Hire C1

Villa Helena

BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(☎2226789; villahelena@satyam.net.in; 13 Lal Bahadur Shastri St; r ₹2200-2800; 📍) What sits Helena apart from her heritage siblings is the dash of vintage fun she overlays on respectable colonial facades. With 1930s-era Chinese movie posters, wrought-iron beds and high-ceilinged rooms, you feel caught between a black-and-white colonial noir flick and a modern designer's dream.

Hotel De L'Orient

BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2343067; www.neemranahotels.com; 17 Romain Rolland St; r ₹3000-6500; 📍) This is as grand as it gets in Puducherry: a restored colonial mansion with rooms that appeal to your inner pith-helmeted aristocrat. Should you need a sense of columned regal importance, the hush of breezy verandas and the scurrying service of men in clean white uniforms,

this is the place to book. An attached shop has beautiful, wildly overpriced souvenirs.

Park Guest House

ASHRAM HOTEL \$

(☎2224644; 1 Goubert Ave; s/d from ₹450/600) This is the most soughtafter ashram address in town thanks to its wonderful seafront position. All front rooms face the sea and have their own porch or balcony, and there's a large garden area for morning yoga or meditation. These are the best-value AC rooms in town. Prebooking is technically possible but can be difficult, and reception staff can be unfriendly until they're sure you're going to obey the house rules.

New Guest House

ASHRAM HOTEL \$

(☎2221553; 64 Romain Rolland St; d ₹200, r up to 8 people ₹480) Sparse, huge and packed with the ashram faithful; this is a great spot for those who love the monastery cubicle school of lodging.

Santhi Inn

HOTEL \$

(☎2220946; 57 Nehru St; s/d ₹900/1000; 📍) The multistorey Santhi certainly isn't a heritage house, but it's a clean, bland spot with comfy beds, a rooftop bar and a conveniently central location.

Ajantha Beach Guest House

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2338898; 1 Rue Bazar St Laurent; d with sea view ₹1500; 📍) The location is the only real selling point – right on the beachfront promenade. The four sea-view rooms are plain but comfortable and have balconies; others are drab and windowless. Next-door **Lotus Bay View Hotel** has shinier, much more luxurious but equally character-free rooms at nearly twice the price.

Hotel de Pondichery

BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(☎2227409; 38 Dumas St; s/d ₹1800/2500; 📍) Yet another heritage home, this place has colonial-style rooms and outdoor terraces. It's more Old World than luxurious, but rooms are private and quiet, and staff are lovely.

Raj Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎2337346; www.rajlodge.in; 57 Rangapillai St; s/d ₹300/450, d with AC ₹750; 📍) A friendly, central lodge with basic, dark but clean rooms.

**Eating**

Puducherry is a culinary highlight of Tamil Nadu; you get the best of South Indian cooking plus several restaurants specialising in well-prepped French and Italian cuisine. If you've been missing cheese or have a hankering for pâté, you're in luck, and *everyone* in the French quarter offers crepes and good brewed coffee. There's a string of cheap street stalls open past 11pm on Anna Salai and Lal Bahadur Shastri St, and more good cheap Indian eateries around the market.

For self-caterers, **Nilgiris Supermarket** (cnr Mission & Rangapillai Sts; ☎9am-9pm) has a big range of supplies (in addition to toiletries, children's books and toys.)

**Satsanga**

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(☎2225867; 30-32 Labourdonnais St; mains ₹170-350; ☺lunch & dinner) This deservedly popular garden spot serves excellent Continental cuisine and, like most places in this genre, a full Indian menu as well. The large variety of sausages, pâté and lovely home-made bread and butter goes down a particular treat, as do the steaks. **Satsanga Epicerie**, next door, sells French and Italian food supplies; pasta, cheese, even vacuum-packed *jamon*.

Salle a Manger

INDO-FRENCH \$\$

(www.calve.in; Calve hotel, 36 Vysial St; mains ₹150-300; 📍) The speciality here is 'Creole' food, using recipes sourced from Pondy's French-Indian families and using lots of seafood and spices: try the Fish Vindali, full of fresh flavours. Like the decor – all teak and teal-coloured walls – the food has an Indo-Chinese vibe.

kasha ki aasha

CAFE \$\$

(www.kasha-ki-aasha.com; 23 Rue Surcouf; mains ₹125-225; ☎8am-7pm Mon-Sat) You'll get a great pancake breakfast, good lunches (try the 'European-style thali') and delicious cakes served on the pretty rooftop of this colonial-house-cum-craftshop-cum-cafe. Indo-European fusion food includes chips with chutney, and pizza dosa. The heat in some dishes has been dialled back a bit for Western tastes, but it's all delicious.

Le Club

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(38 Dumas St; mains ₹120-330; ☺lunch & dinner) This place wraps three restaurants into one, with heavy French fare at Le Bistro, a simple garden terrace at Le Club, and Vietnamese and Southeast Asian fare in the attached Indochine. Le Club also offers Continental breakfasts.

Surguru

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(99 Mission St; mains ₹40-100; ☺lunch & dinner) Simple South Indian served in a posh setting. Surguru is the fix for thali addicts who like their veg accompanied by the strongest AC this side of Chennai. There's a couple of branches round town.

Le Café

CAFE \$\$

(Goubert Ave; mains ₹50-170; ☺24hr) Situated near the Gandhi statue, this is a good spot for sandwiches, cake, coffee (hot or ice), welcome fresh breezes and clean views over the Bay of Bengal. Be warned, service can be seriously slow; but it's one of the nicest spots in town to wait.

La Terrasse

CONTINENTAL \$\$

(5 Subbayah Salai; pizzas ₹120-200; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) This simple semi-open-air place near the southern end of the promenade has a wide menu but is best known for good pizzas and safe salads, as opposed to its rather ordinary Indian food. No alcohol is served.

Café des Artes

CAFE \$

(Labourdonnais St; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☎) Good brekky and coffee, wi-fi and a

nice outdoor/veranda setting outside a small gallery.

Café de Flore

CAFE \$\$

(Maison de Colombani, Dumas St; ☎8.30am-8pm) In the Alliance Française's performance space, on an airy veranda overlooking a garden, you'll find mocktails, great coffee, sandwiches and chips, along with copies of *Le Monde* to browse.

Baker St

BAKERY \$

(Rue Bussy; pastries ₹35-120) A very popular upmarket, French-style bakery with cakes, brownies, meringues, quiches, baguettes and croissants. Eat in or takeaway.

Saravana Bhavan

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Nehru St; mains ₹30-50) A clean setting with good cheap South Indian – all the thalis, dosa and *vada* you could want.



Drinking & Entertainment

Although this is one of the better spots in Tamil Nadu to sink a beer, closing time is a decidedly un-Gallic 11pm. If you're here on a Friday or Saturday, get ready for some late-night fun, when Pondy stays open until (drum roll)...11.30pm! With low taxes on alcohol, Puducherry has a reputation for cheap booze. The reality is you'll really only find cheap beer in 'liquor shops' or the darkened bars attached to them. Many of the garden and rooftop restaurants in the French Quarter have pleasant bar areas, especially Satsanga and Le Club.

L'e-Space Coffee & Arts

CAFE

(2 Labourdonnais St; ☎8am-11pm) A battered, quirky little semi-open-air cafe for breakfasts, juice, coffee, a bite and some fine cocktails (₹160 to ₹180). Staff are friendly, locals and tourists congregate here, and all in all it's the most social traveller spot in Pondy.



Shopping

With all the yoga yuppies congregating here, Pondy specialises in the boutique-chic-meets-Indian-bazaar school of fashion, accessories and souvenirs. Every Sunday evening the central shopping area on and around Nehru St is packed with clothes stalls strung up in front of closed shop-fronts. Among other things, you'll find the kind of cotton pants and shirts that would cost *waaaaay* more in Pondy's boutiques.

Fabindia

CLOTHING

(www.fabindia.com; 59 Suffren St; ☎10am-8pm) Opposite Alliance Française, this shop has

a good variety of quality woven goods and furnishings, traditionally made but with a contemporary feel. This chain has been in operation since 1960, and one of its selling points is its 'fair, equitable and helpful relationship' with village producers. Next door **Pondy Cre'Art** is also worth checking out, with handbags, handmade paper journals and clothes.

Geethanjali

ANTIQUES

(20 Lal Bahadur Shastri St; ☎10am-7pm) The sort of place where Indiana Jones gets the sweats, this antique and curio shop sells statues, sculptures, paintings and furniture culled from Puducherry's colonial and even pre-colonial history.

Kalki

ACCESSORIES

(134 Mission St; ☎9.30am-8.30pm) Beautiful, jewel-coloured silk clothes, scarves and shoes, as well as jewellery, candles, knick-knacks and more.

kasha ki aasha

CLOTHING, HANDICRAFTS

(www.kasha-ki-aasha.com; 23 Rue Surcouf; ☎8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Fabulous fabrics, gorgeous garments and comfy handmade leather sandals, as well as crafts, are sourced directly from their makers and sold by an all-women staff in this lovely old colonial house. There's a breezy rooftop eatery on-site.

La Boutique d'Auroville

HANDICRAFTS

(38 Nehru St; ☎9.30am-1pm & 3.30-8pm Mon-Sat) It's fun browsing through the crafts here, including jewellery, batiks, *kalamkari* (similar to batik) drawings, carpets and wood-carvings. For more Auroville products head west to the **Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper Factory** (50 SV Patel Salai; ☎8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) for fine handmade paper; ask at the counter about tours of the factory.

Hidesign

BAGS

(cnr Nehru & Mission Sts) Established in Pondy in the 1970s, this boutique sells beautifully made designer leather handbags and 'man bags' in a range of colours, at prices that are very reasonable for what you get. We bought a bag here in 1985 that's still going strong. The 3rd-floor cafe has pasta, burgers and tapas, great coffee and free wi-fi.

Bookshops

French Bookshop

BOOKSTORE

(Suffren St; ☎9am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat) This small shop next to Alliance Française carries many French titles.

Libraire Kailash

(169 Lal Bahadur Shastri St; ☎9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Another excellent collection of titles, particularly coffee-table books, in French.

Focus Books

(204 Mission St; ☎9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9pm Mon-Sat) A big range of English-language books, friendly staff, Lonely Planet guides.

i Information

Puducherry keeps European hours and takes a long lunch break; you can expect most businesses to be closed from about 1pm to 3.30pm.

Cultural Centres

Alliance Française (☎2338146; afpondy@satyam.net.in; 58 Suffren St; ☎9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat) The French cultural centre has a library, computer centre and art gallery, and conducts French-language classes. Films are shown regularly. The monthly newsletter, *Le Petit Journal*, details forthcoming events. Maison Colombani, its associated exhibition and performance space, is on Dumas St.

Internet Access

Coffee.Com (236 Mission St; per 30min ₹30; ☎10am-10pm) There might be some pressure to buy a drink; don't feel obliged.

Wi Corner (1 Caziavar St, cnr Lal Bahadur Shastri St; per hr ₹30; ☎10am-10pm Mon-Sat)

Medical Services

Lal Bahadur Shastri St between Bharathi St and MG Rd is packed with clinics, pharmacies and two 24-hour hospitals.

New Medical Centre (☎2225289; 470 MG Rd; ☎24hr)

Money

Nilgiris Supermarket has a **forex counter** (☎9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) upstairs.

BOOKSTORE

Citibank ATM (cnr Lal Bahadur Shastri & Suffren Sts)

ICICI Bank ATM (47 Mission St)

State Bank of India (15 Suffren St)

Thomas Cook (Labourdonnais St; ☎9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Foreign exchange next to L'e-Space Coffee & Arts.

UTI Bank ATM (164 Rue Bussy)

Tourist Information

Puducherry tourist office (☎2339497; 40 Goubert Ave; ☎9am-5pm)

Travel Agencies

Shanti Travels (Romain Rolland St; ☎8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) Helpful French-run agency offering bus, train and air ticketing, as well as walking tours, day trips, longer tours and airport pick-ups from Chennai.

i Getting There & Away**Bus**

The bus stand is 500m west of town. See the boxed text for details of services. There's a **booking office** (☎7am-2pm & 4-9pm) at the station.

Taxi

Air-conditioned taxis between Puducherry and Chennai cost around ₹3500; it should be cheaper to/from Chennai Airport.

Train

There are two direct services a day to Chennai Egmore (₹52, five hours, 5.35am and 2.35pm), and one to Tirupathy (₹79, nine hours, 1.40pm). There's a computerised booking service for southern trains at the station.

i Getting Around

One of the best ways to get around Pondy is by walking. Large three-wheelers shuttle between the bus stand and Gingy St for ₹5, but they're

BUSES FROM PUDUCHERRY (PONDICHERRY)

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY (DAILY)
Bengaluru	150	8	4
Chennai	56	3½	50
Chidambaram	36	2	50
Coimbatore	170	9	7
Kanchipuram	40	3	6
Kumbakonam	42	4	6
Mamallapuram	35	2	5
Tiruvannamalai	40	3	10
Trichy	80	5	4

hopelessly overcrowded. Autorickshaws are plentiful – a trip across town costs about ₹50.

Since the streets are broad and flat, the most popular transport is pedal power. Bicycle-hire shops line many of the streets, especially MG Rd and Mission St. You'll also find hire shops in Sub-bayah Salai and Goubert Ave. The usual rental is ₹10/50 per hour/day.

Mopeds or motorbikes are useful for getting out to the beaches or to Auroville and can be rented from a number of shops and street stalls. The going rate is about ₹150 a day for a gearless scooter and ₹200 for a motorbike.

Auroville

📍0413 / POP 1800

Auroville is one of those ideas anyone with a whiff of New Age will love: an international community built on soil donated by 124 countries, where dedicated souls, ignoring creed, colour and nationality, work to build a universal township and realise interconnectedness, love and good old human oneness.

In reality, Auroville is both its high ideals and some not-as-glamorous reality. Imagine over 80 rural settlements encompassing scrubby Tamil countryside, where harmony is strived for if not always realised between 1800 residents representing almost 40 nationalities. Two-thirds of Aurovillians are foreign, and outside opinions of them range from positive vibes to critics who say the town is an enclave for expats seeking a self-indulgent rustic escape.

Ultimately, Auroville encompasses all of the above, and anyone interested in the experiment may want to visit on a day trip from Puducherry. Be prepared for lots of posters celebrating 'The Mother', the French traveller-turned-guru, and founder of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (p1014). Be warned: Auroville is not that tourist friendly. Each settlement has its own area of expertise and most Aurovillians are busy simply getting on with their work. Still, you may get a sense of the appeal of the place after a visit to the visitor centre and the **Matrimandir**, Auroville's spiritual heart. One of those unfortunate buildings that tries to look futuristic and ends up coming off dated, this giant golden golf ball/faux Epcot Center contains an inner chamber lined with white marble that houses a solid crystal (the largest in the world), 70cm in diameter, which you won't actually see, since the Matrimandir is not open to casual visitors. But there is a pleasant plot of **gardens** (☀️10am-1pm & 2-4.30pm daily except Sun afternoon), from where you can spy the struc-

ture; you need to pick up a pass (free) from the information service in the visitor centre.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

You can only stay in Auroville if you're serious about contributing to it. A stay of at least a week is preferred and while work isn't obligatory, it is appreciated. Accommodation isn't offered in exchange for work; rooms range from ₹300 to more than ₹1000, and guests are also required to contribute towards the 'maintenance and development' of Auroville.

There are more than 40 guesthouses in Auroville, each tied to communities with specific work missions (women's education, farming etc). The best way to match your interests with the community you'll stay in is to check out the website and, preferably, get suggestions from and make arrangements with the **Auroville Guest Service** (📍2622704; avguests@auroville.org.in) before arriving.

Although there are stores and small roadside eateries in Auroville, and communities have communal dining areas, many Aurovillians gather at the Solar Kitchen – powered by solar energy – which dishes out more than 400 meals daily from its buffet. The cafe at the visitor centre is open to day visitors.

📍 Information

There's a photographic exhibition and video room at the **Auroville Information Service** (www.auroville.org; admission free; ☀️9.15am-1pm & 1.30-5.30pm), which also issues garden passes for external views of the Matrimandir (from 9.45am to 12.30pm and 2pm to 4pm; morning only on Sunday). In the same complex, the **visitor centre** (📍2622239; www.auroville.org; ☀️9am-6pm) contains a bookshop, a nice cafe and Boutique d'Auroville, which sells Aurovillian handicrafts.

📍 Getting There & Away

The best way to enter Auroville is from the coast road, at the village of Periyar Mudaliarchavadi. Ask around as it's not well signposted. A return autorickshaw ride from Puducherry is about ₹300, but a better option is to hire a moped or bicycle. It's about 12km from Puducherry to the visitor centre.

CENTRAL TAMIL NADU

Chidambaram

📍04144 / POP 67,795

There's basically one reason to visit Chidambaram: the great temple complex of Nataraja, Shiva as the Dancer of the Universe.

The greatest Nataraja temple in India also happens to be a Dravidian architectural highlight and one of the holiest Shiva sites in South India. Chidambaram can be visited as a day trip from Puducherry, or as a stopover between Puducherry and Kumbakonam or Trichy.

Of the many festivals, the two largest are the **10-day chariot festivals**, which are celebrated in April/May and December/January. In February/March the five-day **Naty-anjali Dance Festival** attracts performers from all over the country to celebrate Nataraja (Shiva) – Lord of the Dance.

The small town is developed around the Nataraja Temple with streets named after the cardinal points. Accommodation is close to the temple and the bus stand a five-minute walk to the southeast. The train station is about 1km further south.

Sights

Nataraja Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(☺)courtyard & shrines 6am-noon & 4-10pm) The legend goes: one day, in a nearby forest, Shiva and Kali got into a dance-off that was judged by the assembled gods. Shiva finished his routine with a high kick to the head that Kali could not duplicate and won the title Nataraja (Lord of the Dance). It is in this form he is worshipped at the great Shiva temple, which draws a regular stream of pilgrims and visitors. The region was a Chola capital from 907 to 1310 and the temple was erected during the later time of the administration, although local guides claim some of the complex was built by the Palavas in the 6th century. The high-walled 22-hectare complex has four towering *gopurams* decked out in schizophrenic Dravidian stonework.

The main entrance, through the east *gopuram*, off East Car St, depicts the 108 sacred positions of classical Tamil dance. In the northeast of the complex, to the right as you enter, is the 1000-pillared **Raja Sabha** (King's Hall), open only on festival days, and to the left is the **Sivaganga** (Temple Tank), which is thick with mudfish and worshippers performing ritual ablutions. To the west of the entrance to the inner sanctum is a depiction of Shiva as Nataraja that is underlined by a distinctly European pair of cherubic angels. In the southwest corner of the second enclosure is the Dance Hall, decorated with 56 pillars, that marks the spot where Shiva outdanced Kali.

Cameras are not allowed inside the temple, and non-Hindus cannot enter the inner sanctum, although you can glimpse its golden roof and its 21,600 tiles (one for every breath a human takes a day). Nataraja images abound, wherein Shiva holds the drum that beats the rhythm of creation and the fire of destruction in his outstretched hands, ending one cycle of creation, beginning another and uniting all opposites – light and dark, good and evil.

Try to catch the fire ceremony, which occurs six times a day and pulls in hundreds of worshippers who watch a ritual essentially unchanged for thousands of years. The entire complex erupts in drum beats and bells, while fires of clarified oil and butter are passed under the image of the deity, thus ensuring the cycle of creation continues.

Brahmin priests will usually guide you for a fee (anywhere from ₹30 up to ₹300, depending on the language skills and knowledge of the guide) around the temple complex. Since the Brahmins work as a cooperative to fund the temple, you may wish to support this magnificent building by way of donation or hiring a guide (but don't feel bound to do so).

Sleeping & Eating

Chidambaram has many cheap pilgrims' lodges clustered around the temple, but some of these spots come off as pretty dire. If there's anywhere really nice to stay in Chidambaram, we haven't found it yet.

Hotel Saradharam

HOTEL \$

(☎221336; www.hotelsaradharam.co.in; 19 VGP St; d incl breakfast ₹770, with AC ₹1400; 🏠🚶) The busy and friendly Saradharam is as good as it gets, and is conveniently located across from the bus stand. It's a bit worn (readers have met bedbugs here, though we remained unbitten), but it's comfortable enough and a welcome respite from the frenzy of the town centre. The good breakfast buffet is a bonus.

Hotel Akshaya

HOTEL \$

(☎220192; www.hotel-akshaya.com; 17-18 East Car St; d from ₹600; 🏠🚶) Close to the temple and also a bit grotty round the edges, this hotel has a wide range of rooms that run the gamut from boxy singles to quite good-value AC 'suites'.

The best places to eat are in hotels. **Anupallavi** (mains ₹50-120; ☺lunch & dinner) is an excellent AC multicuisine restaurant in

TOP FIVE TEMPLES

Tamil Nadu is nirvana for anyone wanting to explore South Indian temple culture and architecture. Many of the temples are important places of pilgrimage for Hindus, where daily *puja* (offering or prayer) rituals and colourful festivals will leave a deep impression on even the most temple-weary traveller. Other temples stand out for their stunning architecture, soaring *gopurams* (gateway towers) and intricately carved, pillared *mandapams* (pavilions in front of the temple). Almost all have free admission. There are so many that it pays to be selective, but the choice is subjective. Here's our top five:

- » Sri Meenakshi Temple (p1036) This elaborately carved temple complex in Madurai is considered the crowning achievement of South Indian temple architecture.
- » Arunachaleswar Temple (p1012) Fire rituals – and the smell of roasting ghee – dominate this huge temple in Tiruvannamalai.
- » Brihadishwara Temple (p1025) Thanjavur recently celebrated the thousand-year anniversary of this beautiful sandstone temple and fort.
- » Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple (p1029), Trichy (Tiruchirappalli) One of the biggest temples in India, this city-like complex in Trichy has fine carvings and a lively cart festival.
- » Nataraja Temple (p1022) Fire ceremonies commemorate Shiva's role as Lord of the Dance in Chidambaram.

the Saradharam, and the **Golden Roof** (RK Residency, 30 VGP St; mains ₹30-50) does a decent job of Indian and 'Chinese' basics. Just across the bus stand is vegetarian **Ishwarya** (thalis ₹30; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner), which does fine thalis. There are lots of cheap veg eats in the area immediately surrounding the temple complex.

i Information

Bank of India ATM (VGP St)

Cybase (Pillaiyar Koil St; per hr ₹30; ☺9am-9pm) Fast internet access.

ICICI Bank ATM (Hotel Saradharam, VGP St)

Tourist office (☎238739; Railway Feeder Rd; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Frequently deserted.

UAE Exchange (Pillaiyar Koil St; ☺closed Sun afternoon) Best place in town to exchange money.

i Getting There & Away

The bus stand is very central – within walking distance to the temple and accommodation. There are hourly buses to Chennai (₹98, seven hours), and buses to Puducherry (₹36, two hours) and Kumbakonam (₹37, 2½ hours) run regularly. There are also five direct buses daily to Madurai (₹155, eight hours).

Chidambaram is on the Chennai–Trichy gauge line, with services to Kumbakonam, Thanjavur and once a day to Rameswaram (10 hours). The station is a 20-minute walk southeast of the temple (₹50 by autorickshaw).

Kumbakonam

☎0435 / POP 160,767

At first glance Kumbakonam is another Indian junction town, but then you notice the temples that sprout out of this busy city like mushrooms, a reminder that this was once a seat of medieval South Indian power. It's an easy day trip from Thanjavur, and makes a good base for exploring the coastal towns of the Cauvery Delta.

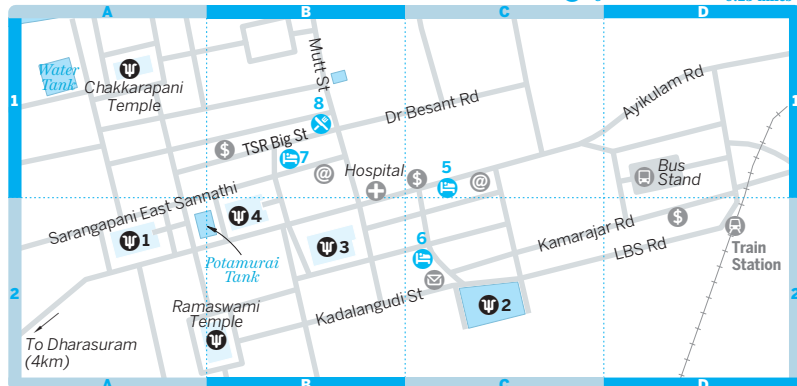
👁 Sights

Dozens of colourfully painted *gopurams* point skyward from Kumbakonam's 18 temples, most of which are dedicated to Shiva or Vishnu, but probably only the most dedicated temple goer would tackle visiting more than a few. All temples are open from 6am to noon and 4pm to 10pm, and admission is free.

The largest Vishnu temple in Kumbakonam, with a 50m-high east gate, is **Saranga-pani Temple**, just off Ayikulam Rd. The temple shrine, in the form of a chariot, was the work of the Cholas during the 12th century.

Kumbeshwara Temple, about 200m west and entered via a nine-storey *gopuram*, is the largest Shiva temple. It contains a lingam said to have been made by Shiva himself when he mixed the nectar of immortality with sand.

The 12th-century **Nageshwara Temple**, from the Chola dynasty, is also dedicated to



Shiva in the guise of Nagaraja, the serpent king. On three days of the year (in April or May) the sun's rays fall on the lingam. The main shrine here is in the form of a chariot.

The huge **Mahamakham Tank**, 600m southeast of the Nageshwara Temple, is the most sacred in Kumbakonam. It's believed that every 12 years the waters of the Ganges flow into the tank, and at this time a festival is held; the next is due in 2016.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Rayas

HOTEL \$
(☎2422545, 2423170; 18 Post Office Rd; d from ₹800; Ⓢ) Friendly service and reliably spacious (and clean) rooms make this your best lodging option in town.

Paradise Resort

RESORT \$\$
(☎2416469; www.paradiseresortindia.com; Tanjore Rd, Darasuram; s/d from ₹3200/3800; Ⓢ) Out of town, this is an atmospheric resort constructed around heritage buildings and thatch and teak cottages. The rooms here have cool tiles and verandas overlooking quiet and spacious gardens, and a plethora of ayurvedic spa treatment options.

Hotel Kanishka

HOTEL \$
(☎2425231; www.hotelkanishka.in; Ayikulam Rd; d from ₹700; Ⓢ) A sparkling new (at our visit) place with smallish and simple but cheerful rooms with yellow feature walls. It's owned and run by a young couple who aim to keep the hotel family friendly.

Pandian Hotel

HOTEL \$
(☎2430397; 52 Sarangapani East St; s/d ₹190/300) It feels a bit institutional, but in

general you're getting good value at this clean-enough budget standby.

Hotel Sri Venkkatramana

INDIAN \$
(TSR Big St; thalis ₹30; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves good fresh veg food and is very popular with locals.

Information

There's no tourist office in Kumbakonam, and road names and signs here are more erratic than usual.

Ashok Net Café (24 Ayikulam Rd; per hr ₹20; ☺9am-10.30pm)

Axis Bank ATM (Ayikulam Rd)

Speed Browsing Centre (Sarangapani East St; per hr ₹20; ☺9am-9pm)

State Bank of India ATM (TSR Big St)

UAE Exchange (☎2423212; 134 Kamarajar Rd) The best place to exchange money.

Getting There & Away

The bus stand and train station are east of the town centre.

Trains to/from Chennai Egmore include the overnight *Rock Fort Express* (sleeper/3AC ₹191/505), going via Thanjavur and Trichy, and the faster *Chennai Egmore Express/Rameswaram Express* (₹158/413). Passenger trains run to Chidambaram (two hours) and Thanjavur.

For the Cauvery Delta area there are buses running every half-hour to Karaikal (₹20, two hours), via Tranquebar and then on to Nagapatnam. Government buses from the bus stand include:

Chennai ₹110, seven hours, every 30 min

Chidambaram ₹37, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes

Kumbakonam

👁 Sights

- 1 Kumbeshwara Temple.....A2
- 2 Mahamakham Tank.....C2
- 3 Nageshwara Temple.....B2
- 4 Sarangapani Temple.....B2

🛏 Sleeping

- 5 Hotel Kanishka.....C1
- 6 Hotel Rayas.....C2
- 7 Pandian Hotel.....B1

🍴 Eating

- 8 Hotel Sri Venkatramana.....B1

Coimbatore ₹140, 10 hours, daily

Madurai ₹72, 10 hours, eight daily

Puducherry ₹42, four hours, every 30 minutes

Thanjavur ₹15, one hour, every 30 minutes

Around Kumbakonam

Only 4km west of Kumbakonam in the village of Dharasuram, the **Airatesvara Temple** (☀6am-noon & 4-8pm), constructed by Rajaraja II (1146-63), is a superb example of 12th-century Chola architecture. Fronted by columns overflowing with miniature sculptures, the temple art depicts, among other things, Shiva in the rare incarnation as Kankalamurti, the mendicant.

At Gangakondacholapuram, 35km north of Kumbakonam, you'll find a Shiva **temple** (☀6am-noon & 4-8pm) built by Rajendra I that represents a latter, somewhat more developed phase of Chola art. Note the 49m-tall *vimana* (tower) that tops the temple; its elegant up-sloping curves stand in stark contrast to the Brihadishwara's angular lines, and as a result the Gangakondacholapuram is often described as the feminine counterpart to the Thanjavur edifice.

Buses go from Kumbakonam bus stand to Gangakondacholapuram every half-hour (₹18, 1½ hours). A rickshaw to Dharasuram costs about ₹90 round trip. Frequent buses head to Dharasuram as well; ask at the bus stand, as these tend to be village buses that will have to drop you off on their way out of town.

Cauvery Delta

The Cauvery River is the beating heart of South Indian agriculture and, back in its day, connected the entire region via river-

ine routes. Today the Cauvery's delta, which spills into Tamil Nadu's east coast, is one of the prettiest and poorest parts of the state. This green and pleasant region can be visited on a lovely day drive (expect to pay about ₹3000 for a return taxi from Kumbakonam).

About 80km south of Chidambaram, **Tranquebar** was a Danish post established in 1620 by the Danish East India Company. The seafront **Danesborg Fort** houses a small museum on the region's Danish history. To get here, take a bus from Chidambaram (₹32, 2½ hours).

Just south of the district capital, Nagapattinam, the main draw of the little town of **Vailankanni**, is the basilica of **Our Lady of Good Health**, built on the spot where a young buttermilk boy glimpsed the Virgin Mary in the 15th century. Distinctly Hindu styles of worship are popular here, and an annual nine-day festival culminates on 8 September, the celebration of Mary's birth. There are daily bus services between Vailankanni and Chidambaram, as well as Chennai, Coimbatore, Bengaluru and Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum).

Thanjavur (Tanjore)

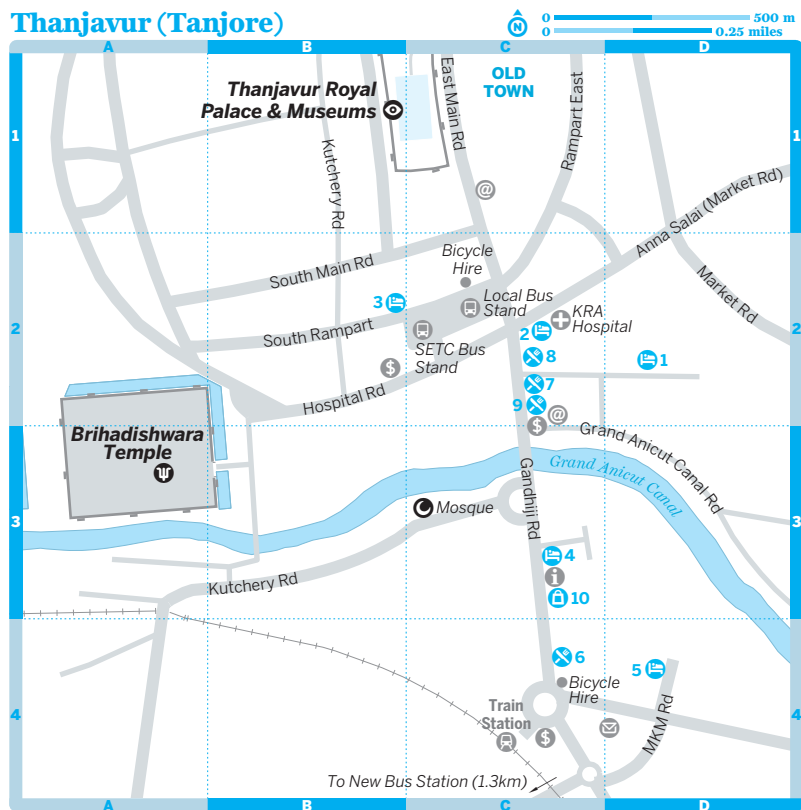
📍04362 / POP 215,314

Here are the ochre foundation blocks of one of the most remarkable nations of Dravidian history, one of the few kingdoms to expand Hinduism beyond India, a bedrock for aesthetic styles that spread from Madurai to the Mekong. A dizzying historical legacy was once administered from Thanjavur, ancient capital of the great Chola Empire, which today...is a chaotic, messy, modern Indian town. Oh, how the good times have gone. But their presence is still remarkably evident; past the honking buses and happy public urination are the World Heritage-listed Brihadishwara Temple and the sprawling Maratha palace complex.

👁 Sights

Brihadishwara Temple & Fort HINDU TEMPLE

(☀6am-noon & 4-8.30pm) Come here twice: in the morning, when the tawny sandstone begins to assert its dominance over the white dawn sunshine, and in the evening, when the rocks capture a hot palette of reds, oranges, yellows and pinks on the Brihadishwara Temple, the crowning glory of Chola temple architecture. The temple was commissioned in 1010 by Rajaraja (whose name literally



means 'king of kings', a well-regarded monarch so organised he had the names and addresses of all his dancers, musicians, barbers and poets inscribed into the temple wall. Thousand-year anniversary celebrations and renovations were held in 2010.

Note the covered statue of Nandi (Shiva's sacred bull) – 6m long by 3m high – that faces the inner sanctum. Created from a single piece of rock, it weighs 25 tonnes and is one of India's largest Nandi statues. There's also a well-executed interpretive centre set along the side alcoves, which includes sculptures and paintings culled from the temple walls (including a particularly energetic Shiva slaying an army of demons while Buddha hovers above. Not for enlightenment either; the demons were Shiva worshippers, and the Buddha took them on as devotees so the Destroyer could justify killing them).

Unlike most South Indian temples where the *gopurams* are the highest towers, here

the 13-storey, 66m *vimana* (centre tower) dominates. There's not a lot of touting here, and the grounds are nice spot to sit awhile.

Thanjavur Royal Palace & Museums

HISTORICAL BUILDING

The pink walls hold court for crows; the queen's courtyard is overrun with weeds; the inner corridors stink of bat guano. And yet... amid the decay are expertly carved bodies of gods and goddesses, sky-bright tile work, massive columns of preserved, chocolate-coloured teak and the incredible murals of one of the great dynasties of South Indian royalty. The labyrinthine complex was constructed partly by the Nayaks of Madurai and partly by the Marathas.

Walk by a local school to enter the main hall of the **palace** (Indian adult/child ₹10/5, foreign adult/child ₹50/25 incl entry to the Durbar Hall & bell tower, camera/video ₹30/250; ☀9am-1pm & 3-6pm) and follow the signs to the elegantly faded **Durbar Hall** (Royal Court). An incred-

Thanjavur (Tanjore)

📍 Top Sights

Brihadishwara Temple.....	A3
Thanjavur Royal Palace & Museums.....	B1

🏠 Sleeping

1 Ashoka Lodge.....	D2
2 Hotel Gnanam.....	C2
3 Hotel Ramnath.....	B2
4 Hotel Tamil Nadu.....	C3
5 Hotel Valli.....	D4

🍴 Eating

6 Bombay Sweets.....	C4
Sahana.....	(see 2)
7 Sathars.....	C2
8 Sri Venkata Lodge.....	C2
9 Thevar's Biryani.....	C2

🛍 Shopping

10 Poompuhar.....	C3
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ible profusion of murals erupts here, un-restored and elegantly faded, bursting with geometric designs, scenes of Hindu legend and a flock of vaguely European-yet-almost-Indian cherubs. With a torch you can peek into a 6km secret passage that runs under the palace and reeks of bat poo.

In the former Sadar Mahal Palace is the **Raja Serfoji Memorial Hall** (admission ₹2), with a small collection of thrones, weapons and photographs; there's a similar collection in the **Royal Palace Museum** (admission ₹1, camera/video ₹30/250). Many of the artefacts date from the early 19th century when the enlightened and far-sighted scholar-king Serfoji II ruled (six generations later, his descendants still lives here).

An extensive **gallery** (Indian adult/child ₹17/2, foreigner ₹30) of Chola bronzes sits between the Royal Palace Museum and the bell tower. Nearby, the **bell tower** is worth a climb for views right across Thanjavur and the palace itself. The spiral stone staircase is dark, narrow and slippery; watch your head and your step.

Perhaps Serfoji II's greatest contribution to posterity is the **Saraswati Mahal Library** (admission free; ☺10am-1pm & 1.30-5.30pm Tue-Thu) between the gallery and the palace museum. It's a monument to both universal knowledge and an eclectic mind that collected prints of Chinese torture methods, Audubon-style sketches of Indian flora and fauna, sketches of

the London skyline, and a collection of some 60,000 palm-leaf and paper manuscripts in Indian and European languages.

🌟 Festivals & Events

Two important festivals are held about 13km north of Thanjavur in Thiruvaiyaru. The January **International Music Festival** honours saint and composer Thyagaraja, and the Thyagarajarajaswami Temple has a 10-day **car festival** in April/May when the largest temple chariot in Tamil Nadu is hauled through the streets.

🏠 Sleeping

There's a bunch of nondescript cheap lodges opposite the SETC bus stand.

Hotel Gnanam

HOTEL \$\$

(☎278501; www.hotelgnanam.com; Anna Salai; s/d from ₹1350/1550; 🍷@☎) The best place in town, the Gnanam has stylish, comfy rooms (the more expensive rooms have bathtubs – the cleanest we've seen in the whole state) and is perfect for anyone needing wi-fi and other modern amenities while they're plopped in Thanjavur's geographic centre. Guests are greeted with chilled face cloths – perfect in such a humid town.

Hotel Valli

HOTEL \$

(☎231580; arasu_tnj@rediffmail.com; 2948 MKM Rd; s/d from ₹340/360; 🍷) Near the train station, the green-painted (inside and out) Valli is a good choice for budget travellers; the non-AC rooms are better value than the more expensive ones. Staff are personable and the rooms themselves are spic-and-span. It's in a reasonably peaceful location beyond a bunch of greasy backyard work-shops.

Hotel Tamil Nadu

HOTEL \$\$

(☎231325; www.ttdconline.com; Gandhiji Rd; d from ₹600; 🍷) The Tamil Nadu is appealing from the outside; the architecture is sultan chic (makes sense, given this is a former royal guesthouse), an atmosphere accentuated by a quiet, leafy courtyard and wide balconies. But inside the rooms are dank, if spacious, and overpriced.

Hotel Ramnath

HOTEL \$

(☎272567; hotel_ramnath@yahoo.com; 1335 South Rampart; s/d from ₹550/600; 🍷) Just across from the SETC bus stand (the attendant noise is not as bad as you might expect), a nice 'upmarket budget' option with fresh rooms.

Ashoka Lodge

(☎230022; 93 Abraham Pandithar Rd; dm/s/d ₹150/195/325, r with AC ₹700; 🍷) The Ashoka's been in business for 44 years, and is frankly looking its age. That said, the rooms are, if a little gloomy, surprisingly spacious for the cost and kept clean.

Eating

There's a cluster of simple veg restaurants, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, near the local bus stand and along Gandhiji Rd.

Sahana

(Hotel Gnanam, Anna Salai; mains ₹70-90; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This classy hotel restaurant does a nice line in fresh, tasty, mainly Indian veg dishes. This might be the only place in town to get a Continental breakfast if you're not up to *idlis* first thing. The hotel's pricier nonveg restaurant, **Diana**, is also very good, with a wide range of tandoori and other northern dishes.

Sri Venkata Lodge

(Gandhiji Rd; thalis ₹30) A few minutes from the local bus stand, this veg-only place does a nice thali.

Bombay Sweets

(Gandhiji Rd; snacks ₹15-30) Near the train station, a clean, popular spot with good sweets (halwa, *burfi*) and snacks like samosas and *bhelpuri*.

Thevar's Biryani

(Gandhiji Rd; mains ₹50-150; ☺closed Fri) Thevar's specialises in exactly what the name suggests, and it specialises in the Mughal rice dish (done up with southern influences here, like sour tamarind sauce) well. Chicken and fish dishes are also good.

Sathars

(167 Gandhiji Rd; mains ₹45-100) Good service and quality food make this place popular. Downstairs is a veg restaurant with lunch-time thalis, upstairs is an AC section with good-value nonveg food.

Shopping

Thanjavur is a good place to shop for handicrafts and arts, especially around the palace, though beware of rickshaw drivers wanting to take you to a particular shop (their commission will be reflected in the price you pay). Numerous shops along East Main and Gandhiji Rds sell everything from quality crafts and ready-made clothes to inexpensive kitsch. For fixed prices and hassle-

HOTEL \$ free shopping, try **Poompuhar** (Gandhiji Rd; ☺10am-8pm Mon-Sat).

Information

24Hrs Internet (Golden Plaza, Gandhiji Rd; per hr ₹20) We can't swear by the claimed opening hours.

ICICI Bank ATM (New Bus Station)

Indian Bank ATM (train station)

Sify iWay (East Main Rd; per hr ₹20; ☺10am-9pm)

State Bank of India ATM (Hospital Rd)

Tourist office (☎230984; Gandhiji Rd; ☺10am-5pm Mon-Fri) On the corner of the Hotel Tamil Nadu complex.

VKC Forex (Golden Plaza, Gandhiji Rd; ☺9.30am-9pm) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Getting There & Away**Bus**

The two city bus stands are for local and SETC buses. SETC has a **reservation office** (☺7.30am-9.30pm). Destinations from here include Chennai (₹120, eight hours, 20 daily) and Ooty (₹135, 10 hours, daily).

The New Bus Station, 2.5km south of the centre, services local areas and destinations south. Bus 74 shuttles between the three bus stations (₹4). Buses from the New Bus Station include:

Chidambaram ₹54, four hours, every 30 minutes

Kumbakonam ₹15, one hour, every 30 minutes

Madurai ₹56, four hours, every 15 minutes

Trichy ₹24, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes

Train

The station is conveniently central at the south end of Gandhiji Rd. Thanjavur is off the main Chennai-Madurai line, so there's only one express train direct to Chennai – the overnight **Rock Fort Express** (sleeper/3AC ₹178/472, 9½ hours) departing at 8.30pm. For more frequent trains north or south, including to Madurai, take a passenger train to Trichy (₹22, 1½ hours, eight daily) and change there. There's a couple of express and three passenger trains daily to Kumbakonam (₹20, one hour).

The **Thanjavur-Mysore Express** leaves daily at 7.15pm for Bengaluru (sleeper/3AC ₹206/547, 10 hours) and Mysore (sleeper/3AC ₹237/627, 14 hours).

Getting Around

The main attractions of Thanjavur are close enough to walk between, but this can make for a tiring day depending on your fitness. Bicycles can be hired from stalls opposite the train station and local bus stand (per hour ₹5). An au-

torickshaw into town from the New Bus Station costs around ₹100.

Trichy (Tiruchirappalli)

☎0431 / POP 866,354

Welcome to (more or less) the geographic centre of Tamil Nadu. Fortunately, this hub isn't just a travel junction, although it does make a good base for exploring large swathes of central Tamil Nadu. But Tiruchirappalli, universally known as Trichy, also mixes up a throbbing bazaar with several major must-see temples.

Trichy's long history dates back to before the Christian era when it was a Chola citadel. Since then it's passed into the hands of the Pallavas, Pandyas, Vijayanagars and Deccan sultans. The modern town and the Rock Fort Temple were built by the Nayaks of Madurai.

Trichy's places of interest are scattered over a large area from north to south, but for travellers the city is conveniently split into three distinct areas. The Trichy Junction, or Cantonment, area in the south has most of the hotels and restaurants, the bus and train stations and tourist office. This is where you're likely to arrive and stay. The Rock Fort Temple and main bazaar area is 2.5km north of here; the other important temples are in an area called Srirangam, a further 3km to 5km north again,

across the Cauvery River. Fortunately, the whole lot is connected by a good bus service.

👁 Sights

Rock Fort Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p1029; admission ₹3, camera/video ₹20/100; ☀6am-8pm) The Rock Fort Temple, perched 83m high on a massive outcrop, lords over Trichy with stony arrogance. The ancient rock was first hewn by religious-minded Pallavas, who cut small cave temples into the southern face, but it was the war-savvy Nayaks who later made strategic use of the naturally fortified position. There are two main temples: **Sri Thayumanaswamy Temple**, halfway to the top (there may be some bats snoozing in the ceiling), and **Vinayaka Temple**, at the summit, dedicated to Ganesh. There are 437 stone-cut steps to climb, and the hike is worth the effort – the view is wonderful, with eagles wheeling beneath and Trichy sprawling all around into the greater Cauvery. Non-Hindus are not allowed inside either temple.

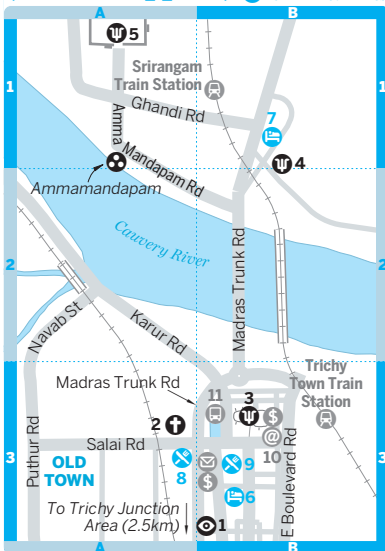
Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Map p1029; camera/video ₹50/100; ☀6am-1pm & 3-9pm) Alright temple-philes, here's the one you've been waiting for: quite possibly the biggest temple in India. Located about 3km north of the Rock Fort, it feels more like a self-enclosed city than a house of worship,

Trichy

(Tiruchirappalli)



Trichy (Tiruchirappalli)

👁 Sights

- 1 Hazrat Nathervali Dargah.....B3
- 2 Lourdes Church.....A3
- 3 Rock Fort Temple.....B3
- 4 Sri Jambukeshwara Temple.....B1
- 5 Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple.....A1
St Joseph's College Museum.....(see 2)

🏠 Sleeping

- 6 Hotel Royal Sathyam.....B3
- 7 Hotel Temple In.....B1

🍽 Eating

- 8 Banana Leaf.....A3
- 9 Vasanta Bhavan.....B3

🛍 Shopping

- Poompuhar.....(see 6)

ℹ Information

- 10 Sify iWay.....B3

🚗 Transport

- 11 City Bus Stand.....B3

and in truth, that's the idea: entering this temple's inner sanctum requires passing through seven *gopuram* (the largest is 73m high). Inside the fourth wall is a kiosk where you can buy a ticket (₹10) and climb the wall for a semi-panoramic view of the complex that delineates levels of existence and consciousness. You'll proceed past rings of beggars, merchants and Brahmins, then plazas of *devas* (celestial beings) and minor deities before reaching the inner chamber, dedicated to Vishnu. Here, the god is worshipped as Sheshashayana, Vishnu who sleeps on a bed made of the king of *nagas*.

Take note of the numerous carvings and statues of *vanaras* (literally 'forest people'), monkey warriors and princesses from the Ramayana, as well as avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu in one of his animal forms, such as the half-lion Nairarishma. These may have been tribal pre-Hindu deities that were folded into the religion, and remain popular objects of worship.

If you turn right just before you go through the fifth gate there's a small, dusty **Art Museum** (admission ₹5; ☎9am-1pm & 2-6pm) with some fascinating exhibits, including bronze statues, the tusks of former temple elephants, and copper edict plates. The highlight is a collection of beautifully detailed 17th-century (Nayak period) ivory carvings of gods, kings and queens (some of them erotically engaged), demons and even a Portugese soldier; they look Balinese in style, although of course the influence flowed in the other direction.

A **Temple Chariot Festival** where statues of the deities are paraded aboard a fine chariot is held here each January, but the most important festival is the 21-day **Vaikunta Ekadasi** (Paradise Festival) in mid-December, when the celebrated Vaishnavite text, Tiruvaimozhi, is recited before an image of Vishnu.

Bus 1 from Trichy Junction or Rock Fort stops right outside this temple.

Sri Jambukeshwara Temple HINDU TEMPLE (Tiruvanakoil; Map p1029; camera/video ₹20/150; ☎6am-1pm & 3-9pm) If you're visiting the five elemental temples of Shiva, you need to visit Sri Jambukeshwara Temple, dedicated to Shiva, Parvati and the medium of water. The liquid theme of the place is realised in the central shrine, which houses a partially submerged Shiva lingam. The outer chambers are full of carvings, including several of an elephant being freed from a spiderweb

by Shiva, which provoked the pachyderm to perform *puja* for the Destroyer.

If you're taking bus 1, ask for 'Tiruvanakoil'; the temple is about 100m east of the main road.

Lourdes Church

CHURCH

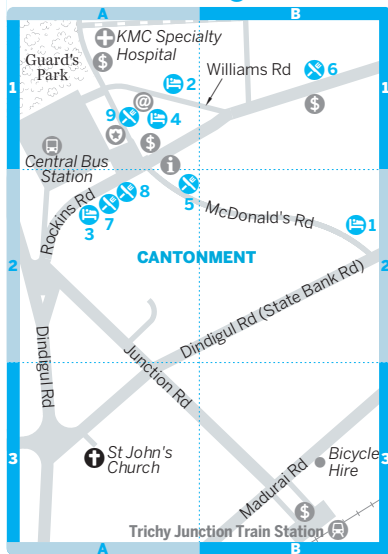
(Map p1029; Madras Trunk Rd) This church is heavily decked out in Gallo-Catholic design, from neo-Gothic spires to the anguished scenes of crucifixion and martyrdom painted inside. The hush of the nave makes an interesting contrast to the frenetic activity that characterises Trichy's Hindu temples. The **Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes** is held on 11 February. The entrance to Lourdes is on Madras Trunk Rd, and when you're finished you can escape into the green and cool campus of Jesuit St Joseph's College (where classes run from Intro to Javascript to Comparative Theology). An eccentric and dusty **museum** (admission free; ☎10am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Sat) contains the natural history collections of the Jesuit priests' summer excursions to the Western Ghats in the 1870s. Bang on the door and the caretaker will let you in – or not, depending on if he's there.

Hazrat Nathervali Dargah

TOMB

(Map p1029) This is the tomb of popular Muslim saint Natther. From a distance the mausoleum is a minaret-ensconced compound

Trichy (Tiruchirappalli) Junction Area



with distinctly Arab sea-green embellishments, but the *puja*-like worship of Natther has strong Hindu overtones. If you're asking for directions most people will know it as 'the Muslim shrine'.

Sleeping

The majority of Trichy's hotels are in the Junction/Cantonment area around the bus station and a short walk north of the train station. Most budget hotels have either doubled their prices or halved their cleaning budgets in the last couple of years; the upper budget and midrange spots here are much better value, charging only a little more for good non-AC rooms than you'd pay for a grim cheapie.

Femina Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p1030; ☎2414501; try_femina@sancharnet.in; 104C Williams Rd; d incl breakfast from ₹770; 🍷🍷🍷) Femina is one of those Indian business hotels that manages to be affordable even if you're on a budget – and the staff don't look at travellers as if they've just crawled out of a swamp. Nonguests can use the pool and small gym (per hour ₹75). Good buffet breakfast including toast and eggs as well as the full traditional South Indian.

Ramyas Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p1030; ☎2412626; www.ramyas.com; Williams Rd; s/d from ₹650/750; 🍷🍷) Another good corporate spot, although it *has* been known to be unfriendly to backpackers. Rooms in the new block are clean and stylish, some with pleasant balconies overlooking the trees, and the non-AC rooms are good value, though some are a bit smoky smelling. There's a couple of decent restaurants on-site; the **Meridien** has excellent local Chettinad-style dishes.

Hotel Royal Sathyam

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p1029; ☎4011414; www.hotelsathyam.co.in; 42A Singarathope; s/d from ₹1200/1400; 🍷) Towering over a posh jewellery shop, this is the

classiest place to stay if you want to be close to the temple and market action. Rooms are small but stylish, with extra-comfy mattresses and a fresh wood-and-whitewash theme that's almost but not quite 'boutique'.

Breeze Residency

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p1030; ☎2414414; www.breezehotel.com; 3/14 McDonald's Rd; s/d from ₹2300/2700; 🍷🍷🍷) Undergoing a name change and a noisy refurbishment when we visited, the Breeze is enormous, semiluxurious and in a relatively quiet location. The best rooms are on the top floors but all are well appointed. Hotel facilities include a health club; a very good restaurant, the **Madras** (mains ₹90-250); and a bizarre Wild West theme bar.

Hotel Temple In

HOTEL \$

(Map p1029; ☎4250304; 139 Madras Trunk Rd; s/d from ₹450/750; 🍷) Opened literally the day before we visited, this friendly, very clean (for now) spot near the two major temples in the Srirangam area was a much better choice than the budget options in the Cantonment at the time of research.

Hotel Meega

HOTEL \$

(Map p1030; ☎2414092; 3 Rockins Rd; d from ₹425; 🍷) It's friendly and still reasonably cheap (though not as cheap as it should be), but rooms are worn and grubby and the creaky lift gave us some scary moments. There's a popular veg restaurant downstairs. Next-door **Hotel Mathura** is another cheapie with peeling walls that's hiked its prices for no good reason, but if you're really on a budget it's clean and spacious enough.

Eating

Femina Food Court

MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p1030; Williams Rd; mains ₹60-35, snacks ₹10-30; 🍷lunch & dinner) Next to the Femina 'shopping mall' (two large shops) is a shaded outdoor-seating area with a Chinese restaurant, an Indian snack bar, and a juice and

Trichy (Tiruchirappalli) Junction Area

Sleeping

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|----|------------------------|---------|
| 1 Breeze Residency..... | B2 | Femina Food Court..... | (see 2) |
| 2 Femina Hotel..... | A1 | 6 Marrybrown..... | B1 |
| 3 Hotel Meega..... | A2 | 7 Shree Krishnas..... | A2 |
| 4 Ramyas Hotel..... | A1 | 8 Vasanta Bhavan..... | A2 |
| | | 9 Veg Tandoori..... | A1 |

Eating

- | | |
|--------------------|----|
| 5 Banana Leaf..... | A2 |
|--------------------|----|

Transport

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------|
| Sri Lankan Airlines..... | (see 2) |
|--------------------------|---------|

cake shop; the Chinese is especially tasty and it's a good spot to take a break.

Banana Leaf

INDIAN \$
(Map p1029; ☎271101; Madras Trunk Rd; mains ₹30-90; ☺lunch & dinner) A big menu of regional favourites. The speciality is the fiery, vaguely vinegary cuisine of Andhra Pradesh. Another branch is next to the Hotel Tamil Nadu in Trichy Junction.

Shree Krishnas

INDIAN \$
(Map p1030; 1 Rockins Rd; mains ₹20-40; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the lower floor of Hotel Mathura, with a nice view of the buses playing plough-the-pedestrian across the road, this is a reliable spot for veg goodness and milky-sweet desserts.

Vasanta Bhavan

INDIAN \$
(Map p1029; West Blvd; mains ₹30-60; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pop in here for North Indian veg - that of the paneer and naan genre - if you're tired of dosas and *idlis* (of course you can get them too, along with excellent lassi). There's another branch in the Cantonment, next to Shree Krishnas.

Marrybrown

FAST FOOD \$\$
(Map p1030; Williams Rd; burger ₹70-150; ☺11am-11pm) Join the cool kids for burgers, fries and chicken at this popular chain.



Shopping

The main bazaar, which runs by the entrance to the Rock Fort, is as chaotic and crowded as you like; it constantly feels like all of Trichy is strolling the strip. The usual array of plastic toys and silk saris is on sale. Try **Poompuhar** (Map p1029; West Blvd Rd; ☺9am-8pm) for fixed-price crafts.

Information

Axis Bank ATM (Map p1029; Chinnar Bazaar)

Canara Bank (Map p1030; Royal Rd)

ICICI Bank ATM Junction Rd (Map p1030); West Blvd Rd (Map p1029)

Indian Bank ATM (Map p1030; Rockins Rd)

Indian Panorama (☎4226122; www.indianpanorama.in) Trichy based and covering all of India, this professional and reliable travel agency/tour operator is run by an Indian-Australian couple.

KMC Speciality Hospital (Map p1030; ☎4077777; Royal Rd) A large hospital in the Cantonment.

Sify iWay (internet per hr ₹30; ☺9am-9pm) Chinnar Bazaar (Map p1029); Williams Rd (Map p1030)

State Bank of India ATM (Map p1030; Williams Rd)

Tourist office (Map p1030; ☎2460136; 1 Williams Rd; ☺10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) One of the more helpful tourism info offices in the state.

Getting There & Away

Trichy is virtually in the geographical centre of Tamil Nadu and it's well connected by air, bus and train.

Air

As well as domestic flights, Trichy's airport has opened up to international flights in the last couple of years. **Sri Lankan Airlines** (Map p1030; ☎2460844; ☺9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), with an office at Femina Hotel, has 10 flights a week to Colombo (₹8700). **Air Asia** (☎4540393) flies daily to Kuala Lumpur, and **Air India Express** (☎2341744; trzapt@airindiaexpress.in) flies to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Abu Dhabi.

Bus

Most buses head to the **Central bus station** (Map p1030; Rockins Rd) on Rockins Rd. If you're

BUSES FROM TRICHY (TIRUCHIRAPPALLI)

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bengaluru	160	8	3 daily
Chennai	120-190	7	every 15min
Chidambaram	55	3½	hourly
Coimbatore	80	7	every 30min
Kodalkanal	65	5½	3 daily
Madurai	42	3	every 15min
Ooty	100	8	daily
Puducherry	80	5	3 daily
Thanjavur	24	1½	every 15min

travelling to Kodaikanal, a good option is to take one of the frequent buses to Dindigul (₹25, two hours) and change there. For details of services, see the boxed text, opposite.

Train

Trichy is on the main Chennai–Madurai line so there are lots of rail options in either direction. Of the nine daily express services to Chennai, the quickest are the *Vaigai Express* (2nd/chair class ₹104/367, 5½ hours) departing Trichy at 8.50am, and the *Pallavan Express*, which leaves at 6.30am. The best overnight train is the *Rock Fort Express* (sleeper/3AC ₹164/432, 7½ hours) at 10pm.

For Madurai the best train is the *Guruvaya Express* (2nd class/sleeper ₹62/120, three hours), which leaves at 1.15pm. The *Mysore Express* goes daily to Bengaluru at 8.35pm (sleeper/3AC ₹187/496, 8½ hours) and Mysore (₹236/636, 12½ hours).

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

The 6km ride into town is about ₹300 by taxi and ₹100 by autorickshaw; there's a prepaid taxi stand at the airport. Otherwise, take bus 7, 59, 58 or 63 to/from the airport (30 minutes).

Bicycle

Trichy lends itself to cycling as it's flat; it's a reasonably easy ride from Trichy Junction to the Rock Fort Temple, but a long haul to Srirangam and back. There are a couple of places on Madurai Rd near the train station where you can hire bicycles (per hr ₹5).

Bus

Trichy's local bus service is easy to use. Bus 1 (any letter) from the **Central bus station** (Map p1030; Rockins Rd) goes every few minutes via the Rock Fort Temple, Sri Jambukeshwara Temple and the main entrance to Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple (₹5). To see them all, get off in that order (ask the conductor or driver where the stops are), as it runs in a one-way circuit.

SOUTHERN TAMIL NADU

Trichy to Rameswaram

In Pudukkottai district, between Trichy and Rameswaram, is Tamil Nadu's best example of temples, cave art, the homeland of the region's greatest traders and bankers, and has a few other stops that make a good road trip (or day tour from Trichy, Madurai or Rameswaram).

PUDUKKOTTAI & AROUND

Some 34km south of Trichy is the nondescript town of Pudukkottai, which has historical im-

portance in inverse proportion to its current obscurity; from 1680 to 1947 this was one of the great princely states of South India.

Pudukkottai Museum

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☎9.30am–5pm) The relics of bygone days are on display in this wonderful museum, located in a renovated palace building in Pudukkottai town. Its eclectic collection includes musical instruments, megalithic burial artefacts, and some remarkable paintings and miniatures.

Vijayalaya Cholisvaram

HINDU TEMPLE

(Natharmalai; admission free) About 16km north of Pudukkottai, above the village of Natharmalai, is this small but stunning 10th-century rock-cut temple, reminiscent of the famous carvings at Mamallapuram but almost always deserted. Villagers will point you to the site, which takes a quick walk up a rocky hill with views of the green and serene countryside around. If the caretaker's around he'll give an enthusiastic tour and open up the temple to show scraps of ancient frescoes, and may direct you to other temples being restored in the area. Further up the road is **Sittannavalai** (admission ₹100), where you'll find a small Jain cave temple that conceals more frescoes and statues of Jain saints sitting in cross-legged repose.

Tirumayam Fort

FORT

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☎9am–5pm) Simple and imposing, the renovated Tirumayam Fort, located about 17km south of Pudukkottai, is worth a climb for the 360-degree views from the battlements onto the surrounding countryside. Or you can take a shady rest with local goats under a banyan tree.

KARAIKKUDI & AROUND

In the backstreets of small **Kanadukathan** are the wedding-cake houses of the Chettiars, an interrelated clan of bankers, merchants and traders. The mansions of the community are decked out in the cosmopolitan goods bought home by Chettiars during their extensive trading forays: Belgian chandeliers, Italian granite, Burmese teak and artwork from around the world.

To get a feel for the royal life, book a night in one of the following heritage houses; they're pricey but they provide a fantastic experience. All have kitchens producing authentic Chettinad cuisine, which is not as chilli-laden as traditional South Indian food (and less likely to be vegetarian); Visalam has an 'interactive kitchen' and Bangala offers cooking courses for groups.

(☎4564-273301; www.cghearth.com; Local Fund Rd, Kanadukathan; r from ₹10,700; 🍷@🍷) Stunningly restored and professionally run by a Malayali hotel chain, it's no longer in the hands of the original family but it's still decorated with their old photos, furniture and paintings, and staff can tell you the sad story of the young woman the house was built for. The garden is lovely and the pool setting is magical, with a low-key cafe alongside it.

Bangala

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎4565-220221; www.thebangala.com; Devakottai Rd, Karaikkudi; d ₹4500-5400; 🍷@🍷) This lovingly restored whitewashed home ('bungalow') is quirkily decorated with locally sourced antique furniture, fascinating old photos of the owner's family, film posters and traditional crafts. Famous for its Chettinad food (₹500 for the set meal, and worth every paisa), it has a beautiful outdoor/indoor dining area. Rooms are spacious, comfy and individually styled; the 'honeymoon room' has a private veranda and an enclosed, carved wooden bed with a mirror in the roof!

Chettinadu Mansion

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎4564-273080; www.chettinadumansion.com; Kanadukathan; s/d ₹4700/6400; 🍷@🍷) Slightly shabbier than some of the Chettiar joints, and much more colourfully decorated, this house is still owned by the original family. Service is top-notch, and all rooms have private balconies looking over other mansions in the village.

i Getting There & Away

This region is an easy day tour from Trichy (taxi ₹1600) or Madurai (a little more). Otherwise catch one of the many daily buses from Trichy to Karaikkudi (₹56, three hours) and get on and off at the sights along the way. Coming from Madurai, get a bus to Karaikkudi and take a local bus or hire a taxi. Kanadukathan is about a 500m walk off the main road. Regular buses run between Karaikkudi, via Ramanathapuram, to Rameswaram.

Rameswaram

☎04573 / POP 37,968

Rameswaram was once the southernmost point of sacred India; to leave her boundaries was to abandon caste and fall below the status of the lowliest skinner of sacred cows. Then Rama, incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the Ramayana, led an army of monkeys and bears to the ocean and crossed into the

kingdom of (Sri) Lanka, where he defeated the demon Ravana and rescued his wife, Sita. Afterwards, prince and princess came to this spot to offer thanks to Shiva.

If all this seems like so much folklore, it's absolute truth for millions of Hindus, who flock to the Ramanathaswamy Temple to worship where a god worshipped a god.

Apart from these pilgrims, Rameswaram is a sleepy fishing village. It's also an island, connected to the mainland by the Indira Gandhi bridge, and used to serve as a ferry link to Sri Lanka.

Most hotels and restaurants are clustered around the Ramanathaswamy Temple. The bus stand, 2km to the west, is connected by shuttle bus to the town centre.

👁 Sights

Ramanathaswamy Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(camera ₹25; ☀4am-1pm & 3-8.30pm) When Rama decided to worship Shiva, he figured he'd need a lingam to do the thing properly. Being a god, he sent a flying monkey to find the biggest lingam around – in this case, a Himalayan mountain. But the monkey took too long, so Rama's wife Sita made a simple lingam of sand, which Shiva approved of, and which is enshrined today in the centre of this temple. Besides housing the world's holiest sand mound, the structure is notable for its horizon-stretching thousand-pillar halls and 22 *theerthams* (tanks), which pilgrims are expected to bathe in and drink from. Only Hindus may enter the inner sanctum.

Even when the temple is closed, it is possible to take a peaceful amble through the extensive corridors. In the evening, before the temple is closed, you may see temple Brahmins take some of the residing deities on a parade through the halls of Ramanathaswamy.

Gandamadana Parvatham

HINDU TEMPLE

This temple, located 3km northwest of Rameswaram, is a shrine reputedly containing Rama's footprints. The two-storey *mandapam* is on a small hill – the highest point on the island – and has good views out over the coastal landscape. Pilgrims visit at dawn and dusk.

Dhanushkodi & Adam's Bridge

Kanyakumari may technically be India's land's end, but **Dhanushkodi** plays the part better. About 18km southwest of town, this is a long, low sweep of sand, dust devils, fish-

ing hamlets, donkeys and green waves. It's tempting to swim here, but be careful of strong rips. You can ride a passenger truck for a few rupees, or walk 2½ hours (one way!) to the edge: **Adam's Bridge**, the chain of reefs, sandbanks and islets that almost connects India with Sri Lanka, 33km away, was supposedly built by Rama and his monkey army. Buses (₹5, hourly) from the local bus stand on East Car St stop about 4km before the beach so you have to walk the rest of the way, and an autorickshaw costs ₹300 return.

About 10km before Dhanushkodi, the **Kothandaraswamy Temple** was the only structure to survive a cyclone that destroyed the village in 1964. Legend has it Rama, overcome with guilt at having killed Ravana, performed a *puja* on this spot and thereafter the temple was built.

★ Festivals & Events

During the **car festival** (February/March), a huge decorated chariot with idols of the deities installed is hauled through the streets in a pulsating parade. **Thiru Kalyana** (July/August) is a festival celebrating the celestial marriage of Shiva and Parvati.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

Budget travellers should drop in at the **rooms booking office** (East Car St; ☎24hr), opposite the main temple entrance, which can score doubles for as low as ₹300 a night. Many hotels here are geared towards pilgrims, which means staff can be conservative, often refusing to take in single travellers; this is the case for most of the cheapies (and at the rooms booking office). The cheapest rooms tend to be dire, but there's a string of reasonable midrange hotels. Book ahead before festivals.

Hotel Royal Park HOTEL \$\$
(☎221680; Ramnad Hwy; s/d ₹ 1250/1650; ☎) It sounds like a contradiction in terms, but this place on the main road near the bus stand is actually the most peaceful hotel in town. A couple of kilometres from the main temple action, it bills itself as a 'budget luxury hotel'; rooms are standard midrange with some nice artwork, and the attached AC veg restaurant is good value (mainly South Indian, but the cheese and tomato toastie is perfect too).

Hotel Sunrise View HOTEL \$\$
(☎223434; East Car St; d ₹1300; ☎) The best of the newish midrange places near the temple, this has sparkling tiles and wooden furniture that's a tad better quality than at

other spots. Some rooms have good sea views; just try to look out at the ocean rather than down at the rubbish on the ground.

Hotel Sri Saravana HOTEL \$
(☎223367; htl_saravana@yahoo.com; South Car St; r from ₹770; ☎) This is a friendly, clean hotel with good service and spacious rooms, and it's not averse to single travellers. Rooms towards the top have sea views (and increased rates).

Hotel Shanmuga Paradise HOTEL \$
(☎222984; www.shanmugaparadise.com; Middle St; d from ₹500, with AC from ₹800; ☎) This is another reasonable midrange place, just removed from the eastern temple entrance. Rooms are a fraction more tired than at some of the newer spots.

Lodge Santhya HOTEL \$
(☎221329) This grotty spot offers singles for as low as ₹190. You get what you pay for, but, if you must, pinch that penny. Next-door **Santhana Lodge** is similar; neither place will take singles.

Guru Lodge HOTEL \$
(☎221531; East Car St; d ₹475) Right by the main temple entrance, this place isn't great value for money (it's not a lot cleaner than the real cheapies) but it's the cheapest place we found that would accept single travellers.

A number of inexpensive vegetarian restaurants such as **Ashok Bhavan** (West Car St) and **Vasantha Bhavan** (East Car St) serve thalis for around ₹40. As you might guess there's a focus on South Indian food here, but **Ram Nivas** (West Car St; mains ₹20-50) does a nice line in North Indian veg, such as paneer and dhal fry. You can find fish in a few restaurants, but we didn't find anything else carnivore friendly.

📍 Information

You can't change money here but the **State Bank of India** (East Car St) has an ATM accepting international cards.

Siva Net (Middle St; per hr ₹40; ☎8am-9pm) Internet.

Tourist Office (☎221371; bus stand; ☎10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Friendly but not terribly helpful.

📍 Getting There & Away

Bus

Buses run to Madurai every 10 minutes (₹50, four hours). There are SETC buses to Chennai (₹248, 12 hours, daily), Kanyakumari (₹125,

10 hours, two daily) and Trichy every half-hour (₹90, seven hours). There are also private buses and minibuses from the town centre to Chennai and Madurai.

Train

The overnight *Sethu Express* leaves for Chennai daily at 8pm (sleeper/3AC ₹246/665, 12 hours).

i Getting Around

Town buses 1 and 2 (₹2) travel between the temple and the bus stand from early morning until late at night. Cycling is a good way to get around, with many stalls renting old rattlers for ₹5 per hour.

Madurai

0452 / POP 1.2 MILLION

Chennai may be the heart of Tamil Nadu, but Madurai claims her soul. Madurai is Tamil borne and Tamil rooted, one of the oldest cities in India, a metropolis that traded with ancient Rome and outlasted her destruction.

Tourists, Indian and foreign, usually come here to see the temple of Sri Meenakshi Amman, a labyrinthine structure that ranks among the greatest temples of India. Otherwise, Madurai, perhaps appropriately given her age, captures many of India's most glaring dichotomies: a city centre dominated by a medieval temple, an economy increasingly driven by IT, all overlaid with the energy and excitement of a typically Indian city slotted into a much more manageable package than Chennai's sprawl.

History

Tamil and Greek documents record the existence of Madurai from the 4th century BC. It was popular for trade, especially in spices, and was also the home of the *sangam*, the academy of Tamil poets. Over the centuries Madurai has come under the jurisdiction of the Cholas, the Pandyas, Muslim rulers, the Hindu Vijayanagar kings, and the Nayaks, who ruled until 1781. During the reign of Tirumalai Nayak (1623–55), the bulk of the Sri Meenakshi Temple was built, and Madurai became the cultural centre of the Tamil people, playing an important role in the development of the Tamil language.

Madurai then passed into the hands of the British East India Company. In 1840 the company razed the fort, which had previously surrounded the city, and filled in the moat. Four broad streets – the Veli streets – were constructed on top of this fill and to this day define the limits of the old city.

Sights

Sri Meenakshi Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(camera ₹30; ☀4am–12.30pm & 4–9.30pm) The Sri Meenakshi Temple, abode of the triple-breasted, fish-eyed goddess Meenakshi Amman ('fish-eyed' is an adjective for perfect eyes in classical Tamil poetry), is considered by many to be the height of South Indian temple architecture, as vital to the aesthetic heritage of this region as the Taj Mahal is to North India. It's not so much a temple as a 6-hectare complex enclosed by 12 *gopurams*, the highest of which towers 52m over Madurai, and all of which are carved with a staggering array of gods, goddesses, demons and heroes.

According to legend, the beautiful Meenakshi was born with three breasts and this prophecy: her superfluous breast would melt away when she met her husband. The event came to pass when she met Shiva and took her place as his consort. The temple of the cosmic couple was designed in 1560 by Vishwanatha Nayak and built during the reign of Tirumalai Nayak, but its history goes back 2000 years to the time when Madurai was a Pandyan capital.

Much of the temple is off-limits to non-Hindus, but lay people can enter at the eastern *gopuram*. From here you can see the outer rings of the concentric corridors that enclose the sanctums of Meenakshi and Shiva, worshipped here as Sundareswarar, the beautiful lord. Be on the lookout for statues of deities encrusted in small balls of butter, thrown at the gods as offerings from their devout worshippers.

Also within the temple complex, housed in the 1000-Pillared Hall, is the **Temple Art Museum** (adult/child/foreigner ₹ 5/2/50, camera/video ₹50/250; ☀7am–7.30pm). It contains painted friezes and stone and brass images and good exhibits on Hindu deities.

Allow plenty of time to see this temple and be warned: dress codes have been tightened, and no legs should be exposed for either gender, or shoulders (for women). If you're deemed to be immodestly dressed an enterprising young man from the shop across the road will sell you a dhoti. Early mornings or late evenings are the best times to avoid crowds, and there's often classical dance somewhere in the complex at the weekends. 'Temple guides' charge negotiable fees, rarely below ₹200, so prepare to negotiate and be aware that they are often fronts for emporiums and tailor shops.

Gandhi Memorial Museum

MUSEUM

(admission free, camera ₹50; ☺10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm) Housed in an old *tamukkam* (old exhibition pavilion), this excellent museum is set in spacious and relaxing grounds. The maze of rooms contains an impressively moving and detailed account of India's struggle for independence from 1757 to 1947, and the English-language signs pull no punches about British rule. Included in the exhibition is the blood-stained dhoti (long loincloth) that Gandhi was wearing at the time he was assassinated in Delhi in 1948; it's here because he first took up wearing the dhoti as a sign of native pride in Madurai in 1921. The **Gandhian Literary Society Bookstore** (☺Mon-Sat) is behind the museum. The **Madurai Government Museum** (Indian/foreigner ₹ 5/100, camera ₹20; ☺9.30am-5pm Sun-Thu) is next door in the same grounds. Inside is a small collection of archaeological finds, sculpture, bronzes, costumes and paintings.

Tirumalai Nayak Palace

HISTORICAL BUILDING

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/50, camera/video ₹30/100; ☺9am-1pm & 2-5pm) What the Meenakshi Temple is to Nayak religious architecture, the Tirumalai palace is to the secular, although it's just a shell that's in a state of rot today. The main event is the entrance gate, main hall and Natakasala (Dance Hall), with their faded yellow plasterwork, lion and *makara* (crocodile-elephant creature) sculptures and a series of murals that hints at the opulence the Nayak rulers once enjoyed. The rectangular courtyard is known as Swargavilasa (Celestial Pavilion).

Mariamman Teppakkulam

Tank

HISTORICAL BUILDING

This vast tank, 5km east of the old city, covers an area almost equal to that of Sri Meenakshi Temple and is the site of the incredible Teppam (Float) Festival. The tank is empty for most of the year and primarily serves as a cricket ground for local kids. It was built by Tirumalai Nayak in 1646 and is connected to the Vaigai River by underground channels.



Festivals & Events

Teppam (Float) Festival

TEMPLE FESTIVAL

(Jan/Feb) A popular event held on the full moon of the Tamil month of Thai, when Meenakshi temple deities are taken on a tour of the town and floated on the huge Mariamman Teppakkulam Tank. The evening culminates in Shiva's seduc-

tion of his wife, whereupon the icons are brought back to the temple to make love and, in so doing, regenerate the universe (Meenakshi's diamond nose stud is even removed so it doesn't irritate her lover).

Chithrai Festival

TEMPLE FESTIVAL

(Apr/May) The main event on Madurai's busy festival calendar is this 14-day event that celebrates the marriage of Meenakshi to Sundareswarar (Shiva). The deities are wheeled around the Sri Meenakshi Temple in massive chariots that form part of long, colourful processions.

Sleeping

Most of Madurai's accommodation is concentrated in the area between the train station and Sri Meenakshi Temple.

Town Hall Rd, running eastwards from the train station, has a knot of budget hotels, but Madurai's best-value accommodation is the string of almost identical midrange hotels along West Perumal Maistry St, near the train station. Rooms without AC are generally good value and it's worth taking the step up from budget joints. Most have rooftop restaurants with temple and sunset views.

Madurai Residency

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2343140; www.madurairesidency.com; 15 West Marret St; s/d incl breakfast from ₹800/1000; ☹☺) The service is stellar and the rooms are comfy and fresh at this winner, which has the highest rooftop restaurant in town. There's 24-hour internet in the lobby.

Hotel Keerthi

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4377788; www.hellomadurai.in/hotelkeerthi; 40 West Perumal Maistry St; r from ₹990; ☹) Don't be fooled by the nondescript lobby. This spotless, shiny hotel has rooms that are small but surprisingly stylish and modern, with groovy bedspreads, funky wall mirrors, picture walls and flatscreen TV.

Royal Court Madurai

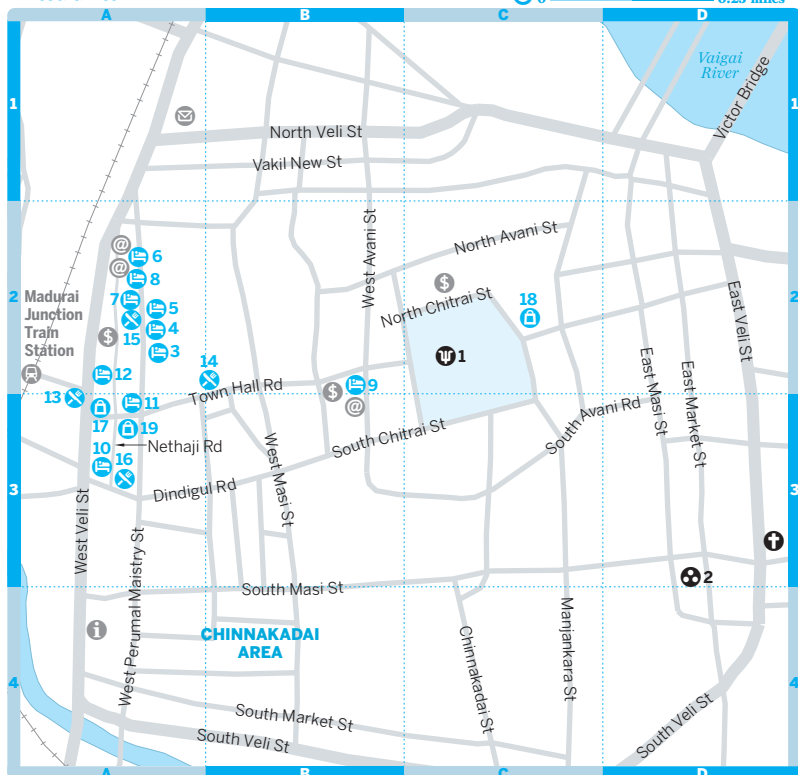
HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎4356666; www.royalcourtindia.com; 4 West Veli St; s/d from ₹2800/3100; ☹☺☺) The Royal Court manages to blend a bit of white-sheeted, hardwood-floored colonial elegance with modern amenities, such as wi-fi in all rooms, that makes it an excellent, centrally located top-end choice for someone who needs a bit of spoiling.

Hotel Park Plaza

HOTEL \$\$

(☎3011111; www.hotelparkplaza.net; 114 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d incl breakfast ₹1900/2300; ☹)



The Plaza's rooms are standard midrange: comfortable and simply furnished, with modern TVs. The front rooms have temple views from the 3rd floor up. There's a good multicuisine rooftop restaurant and the (inappropriately named) **Sky High Bar** – on the 1st floor. Perks include free breakfast and free pick-up from the airport or train station.

Hotel Supreme

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2343151; www.hotelsupreme.in; 110 West Perumal Maistry St; d ₹720, s/d with AC from ₹1320/1500; ☎) This is another large, well-presented hotel that is very popular with domestic tourists. Don't miss the chance to walk into **Apollo**, a bar built to look like a spaceship, and wonder if someone laced your lassi last night. There's good food at the on-site **Surya Restaurant**.

Hotel Rathna Residency

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4374444; www.hotelrathnaresidency.com; 109 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d incl breakfast from

₹1150/1200; ☎) There's not a lot to distinguish this bland, clean, vaguely corporate midrange spot from its neighbours, other than it has nicer pictures on its walls (Mughal-style miniatures) and doesn't offer any non-AC rooms.

Hotel West Tower

HOTEL \$

(☎2346908; West Tower St; s/d from ₹450/650; ☎) Somewhere between budget and mid-range, this place is all about the location (right near the temple) but it's also acceptably clean and friendly.

Hotel Grand Central

HOTEL \$

(☎2343940; 82 West Perumal Maistry St; d from ₹350; ☎) Grand it ain't, but the cheap rooms aren't bad for the price, with clean sheets, cleanish bathrooms, tile floors and TVs.

New College House

HOTEL \$

(☎4372900; collegehouse_mdu@yahoo.co.in; 2 Town Hall Rd; r from ₹275; ☎) FYI: it's spelled 'Neww College House', in huge letters, in

Madurai

Sights

- 1 Sri Meenakshi Temple.....C2
- Temple Art Museum.....(see 1)
- 2 Tirumalai Nayak PalaceD3

Sleeping

- 3 Hotel Grand CentralA2
- 4 Hotel International.....A2
- 5 Hotel Keerthi.....A2
- 6 Hotel Park PlazaA2
- 7 Hotel Rathna RegencyA2
- 8 Hotel Supreme.....A2
- 9 Hotel West TowerB2
- 10 Madurai Residency.....A3
- 11 New College HouseA3
- 12 Royal Court MaduraiA2

Eating

- 13 British BakeryA3
- 14 Dhivyar Mahal Restaurant.....B2
- 15 Emperor RestaurantA2
- 16 Jayaram Fast Foods.....A3
- Shoppers Shop(see 11)
- Surya Restaurant(see 8)

Shopping

- 17 Malligai Book Centre.....A3
- Poompuhar(see 17)
- 18 Puthu Mandapam.....C2
- 19 Turning Point Books.....A3

case you get confused. There's some 250 rooms scattered over this concrete complex. Some are fine, some not so much, and street noise often permeates, so try and get something away from the bustle.

Hotel International HOTEL \$
(☎4377463; 46 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d from ₹280/380) Shabby walls and dank bathrooms; but clean sheets, TVs and wee balconies.

Eating

Along West Perumal Maistry St the rooftop restaurants of a string of hotels offer breezy night-time dining and temple views (don't forget the mosquito repellent); most also have AC restaurants open for breakfast and lunch. Street stalls selling sweets, dosas, *idli* and the like are ubiquitous, especially near the train station. **Shoppers Shop** (Town Hall Rd; ☎8am-11pm) is a well-stocked grocery store that has a good selection of Western foods.

British Bakery

CAFE \$
(West Velli St; mains ₹30-75; ☎lunch & dinner) A clean, popular snack joint with shakes, ice cream, iced tea and other refreshing drinks, along with fries, sandwiches, fried rice and Indian snacks.

Surya Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$
(110 West Perumal Maistry St; mains ₹45-115; ☎dinner) The rooftop restaurant of Hotel Supreme offers a superb view over the city, stand-out service and a nice pure veg menu, but the winner here has got to be the cold coffee, which might as well have been brewed by God when you sip it on a dusty, hot (ie every) day.

Jayaram Fast Foods

MULTICUISINE \$
(5-8 Nethaji Rd; mains ₹45-90; ☎lunch & dinner) There's a busy (and yummy) bakery downstairs, and a crisp and clean restaurant up top that does a nice line in Indian fare, plus burgers and pizzas. While the latter dishes aren't winning any awards, this is as good a piece of pie as you'll find in Madurai. It's a small spot that gets very busy.

Dhivyar Mahal Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$
(☎2342700; 21 Town Hall Rd; mains ₹30-110; ☎lunch & dinner) One of the better multicuisine restaurants not attached to a hotel, Dhivyar Mahal is clean, bright and friendly. The curries go down a treat, and where else are you going to find roast leg of lamb in Madurai?

Emperor Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$
(☎2350490; Hotel Chentoor, 106 West Perumal Maistry St; mains ₹35-90; ☎breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's all veg all the time at Hotel Chentoor's rooftop restaurant, but that karmic goodness is a bit undone by the fact this spot basically becomes a very popular bar come nightfall.

Shopping

Madurai teems with cloth stalls and tailors' shops, which you may notice upon being approached for the umpteenth time by a tailor tout. A great place for getting cottons and printed fabrics is **Puthu Mandapam**, the pillared former entrance hall at the eastern side of Sri Meenakshi Temple. Here you'll find rows of tailors, all busily treading away and capable of whipping up a good replica of whatever you're wearing in an hour or two. Quality, designs and prices vary greatly depending on the material and complexity of the design, but you can have a shirt made

up for as little as ₹200. Every driver, temple guide and tailor's brother will lead you to the Kashmiri craft shops in North Chitrai St, offering to show you the temple view from the rooftop – the views are good, and so is the inevitable sales pitch. For fixed-price crafts try **Poompuhar** (West Veli St; ☎10am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Sat).

There's a couple of good English-language bookshops in town: try **Malligai Book Centre** (11 West Veli St; ☎9am-2pm & 4.30-9pm Mon-Sat) and **Turning Point Books** (75 Venkatesh Towers, Town Hall Rd; ☎10am-9pm); the latter is a 1st-floor shop opposite New College with a good selection of titles on Indian religion.

i Information

Internet access

You can't walk without tripping over an internet cafe. There are several 24-hour Sify iWays, including a couple adjoining hotels in West Perumal Maistry St.

Web Tower Internet (West Tower Rd; per hr ₹20; ☎10.30am-10pm) Downstairs from Hotel West Tower.

Money

ATMs are plentiful.

ICICI Bank ATM (North Chitrai St)

State Bank of India (West Veli St) Has foreign-exchange desks and an ATM; almost next door to Royal Court.

VKC Forex (Zulaiha Towers, Town Hall Rd; ☎9am-6pm) An efficient place to change travellers cheques and cash.

Tourist Information

Madurai tourist office (☎2334757; 180 West Veli St; ☎10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Not a lot of

help, but staff will give you a brochure and map if you ask.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Indian Airlines (☎2341234, airport 2690771; West Veli St; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) flies daily to Mumbai and Chennai, as does SpiceJet, which also flies to Delhi. Jet Airways flies daily to Chennai, and Kingfisher Airlines flies daily to Chennai and Bengaluru. None of these last three airlines has an office in town, but airport counters open at flight times.

Bus

Most long-distance buses arrive and depart from the **Central bus station** (☎2580680; Me-lur Rd; ☎24hr), 6km northeast of the old city. It appears chaotic but is actually a well-organised 24-hour operation. Local buses shuttle into the city every few minutes for ₹3. An autorickshaw to the train station (where most of the hotels are located) is about ₹100. The boxed text on p1040 lists prices for government buses; some express services run to Bengaluru, Chennai, Mysore and Puducherry.

The Arapalayam bus stand, northwest of the train station on the river bank, has regular services to Coimbatore (₹76, six hours), two daily to Kodaikanal (₹48, four to five hours) and to Palani every half-hour (₹38, five hours).

Train

Madurai Junction train station is on the main Chennai–Kanyakumari line. There are at least nine daily trains to Chennai, and three daily services to Kanyakumari.

Some other services include Madurai to Coimbatore (2nd class/sleeper ₹74/155, seven hours) and Bengaluru (sleeper/3AC ₹209/555, 11 hours), as well as Trivandrum and Mumbai.

BUSES FROM MADURAI

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bengaluru	190	12	7 daily
Chennai	160-190	10	every 30min
Chidambaram	95	8	daily
Coimbatore	90	7	daily
Kochi	145	8	daily
Kanyakumari	94	6	hourly
Mysore	280	16	daily (via Ooty)
Puducherry	110	8	2 daily
Rameswaram	58	4	every 30min
Trichy	42	3	every 15min

i Getting Around

The airport is 12km south of town and taxis cost ₹250 to the town centre. Autorickshaws ask around ₹130. Alternatively, bus 10A from the Central bus station goes to the airport, but don't rely on it being on schedule.

Central Madurai is small enough to get around on foot.

Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin)

☎04652 / POP 19,739

The end of India has more appeal than just being the end of the road. There's a whiff of accomplishment (along with dried fish) upon making it to the tip of the country, the terminus of a narrowing funnel of rounded granite mountains – some of India's oldest – green fields plaided with silver-glinting rice paddies and slow-looping turbines on wind farms. Like all edges, there's a sense of the surreal here. You can see three seas mingle, the sunset over the moonrise and the Temple of the Virgin Sea Goddess within minutes of each other. But beyond that, Kanyakumari is a genuinely friendly village that is a nice respite from the dust of the Indian road.

The main temple is right on the point of Kanyakumari and leading north from it is a small bazaar lined with restaurants, stalls and souvenir shops.

👁 Sights & Activities

Kumari Amman Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(☉4.30am-12.30pm & 4-8pm) The legends say the *kanya* (virgin) goddess Kumari, a manifestation of the Great Goddess Devi, single-handedly conquered demons and secured freedom for the world. At this temple pilgrims give her thanks in an intimately spaced, beautifully decorated temple, where the nearby crash of waves from three oceans can be heard through the twilight glow of oil fires clutched in vulva-shaped votive candles (a reference to the sacred femininity of the goddess). Men must remove their shirts to enter and cameras are forbidden.

Gandhi Memorial

MONUMENT

(admission by donation; ☉7am-7pm) Poignantly and appropriately placed at the end of the nation Gandhi fathered is this memorial, which purposely resembles an Orissan temple embellished by Hindu, Christian and Muslim architects. The central plinth was used to store some of the Mahatma's ashes,

and each year, on Gandhi's birthday (2 October), the sun's rays fall on the stone. Guides may ask for an excessive donation, but ₹10 is enough; try and keep an air of silence (even if locals don't).

Kamaraj Memorial

MONUMENT

(☉7am-7pm) Just next to the Gandhi memorial is this shrine to K Kamaraj, known as 'the Gandhi of the South'; Chennai's domestic airport is named after him. One of the most powerful politicians of post-independence India, Kamaraj held the chief ministership of both Madras State and latter-day Tamil Nadu. The shrine is just a collection of dusty blown-up photographs with almost no space given to context or explanation.

Vivekananda Exhibition

MUSEUM

(Main Rd; admission ₹2; ☉8am-noon & 4-8pm) This exhibition, which was closed for refurbishment at the time of research, details the life and extensive journey across India made by the philosopher Swami Vivekananda (the 'Wandering Monk', 1863-1902), who developed a synthesis between the tenets of Hinduism and concepts of social justice. Another exhibition can be found at **Vivekanandapuram** (☎247012; admission free; ☉9am-1pm & 5-9pm), an ashram 3km north of town that provides a snapshot of Indian philosophy, religion, leaders and thinkers.

Vivekananda Memorial

MONUMENT

(admission ₹10; ☉8am-5pm) Four hundred metres offshore is the rock where Swami Vivekananda meditated and chose to take his moral message beyond India's shores. A memorial was built in Vivekananda's memory in 1970, and reflects architectural styles drawn from all over India. It can be a loud place when packed with tourists, but the islet is big enough to provide moments of seclusion.

The huge **statue** on the smaller island, which looks like an Indian Colossus of Rhodes, is not of Vivekananda but Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar. India's 'Statue of Liberty' was the work of more than 5000 sculptors. It was erected in 2000 and honours the poet's 133-chapter work *Thirukural* – hence its height of exactly 133ft (40.5m).

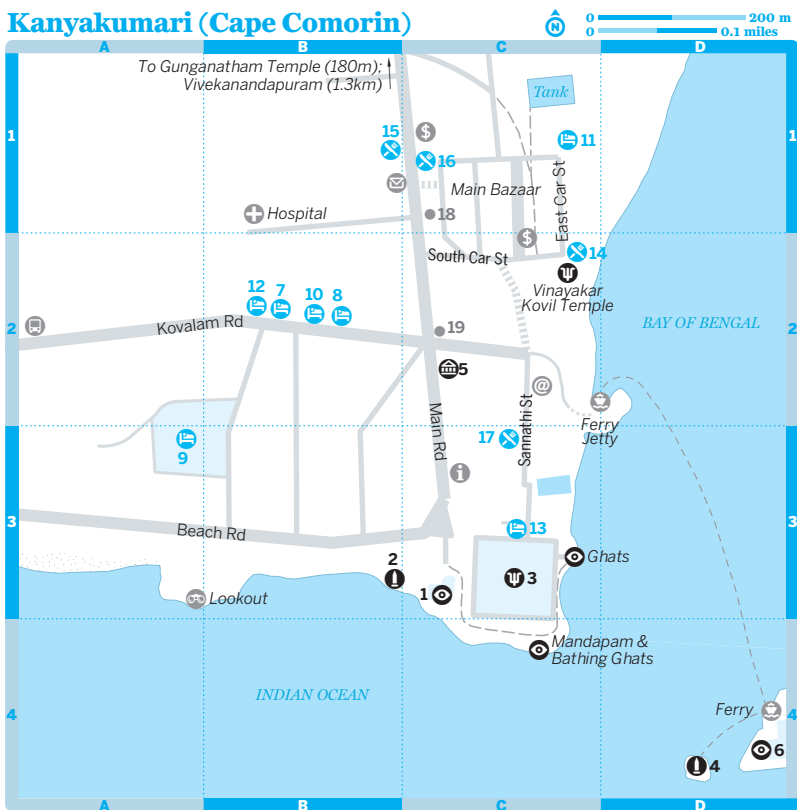
Ferries shuttle between the port and the islands between 8am and 4pm; tickets are ₹20 return.

Seafont

BEACH

There's a crowded beach here and **ghats** that lead down to a lingam half submerged in a

Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin)



wave-driven tidal pool. Past the ice-cream and *chaat* (snack) sellers above the beach is a **memorial** to victims of the 2004 tsunami.

Sleeping

As befits a holiday destination, Kanyakumari's hoteliers have generally gone for bright colours and, dare we say, tackily cheerful decorations; after the bland sameness of midrange hotels around the state, it's quite exciting to find a large neon-coloured tiger painted on your bedhead. Some hotels, especially midrange places around the bazaar, have seasonal rates, so some prices double during April and May, and late October to January.

Manickhan Tourist Home

HOTEL \$
(☎246387; East Car St; d from ₹770; ☹) This very friendly hotel is professionally run and a real pleasure to doss in; the large rooms are all outfitted with clean bathrooms, TV and, if you're willing to shell out a bit, superb

sea views. Next-door **Hotel Maadhini** has almost identical rates and service, with the addition of a garden restaurant that's very pleasant in the evening.

Santhi Residency

HOTEL \$
(☎247091; Kovalam Rd; d from ₹700; ☹) A smaller, older restored house with a more restrained sense of style than the hotels (the only decoration in each simple room is a picture of Jesus), this place is quiet and very clean with a nice patch of leafy garden.

Hotel Tri Sea

HOTEL \$\$
(☎246586; triseahotel@yahoo.com; Kovalam Rd; r from ₹1600; ☹☹) As you walk west of the town you can't miss the high-rise Tri Sea, which offers huge, spotless, airy rooms, most with balconies facing the ocean. The colour schemes are hectic, to say the least, but there are big flatscreen TVs, a great rooftop pool and viewing platforms that make a perfect spot for sunrise and sunset.

Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin)

Sights

- 1 Gandhi Memorial C3
- 2 Kamaraj Memorial B3
- 3 Kumari Amman Temple C3
- 4 Statue of Thiruvalluvar D4
- 5 Vivekananda Exhibition C2
- 6 Vivekananda Memorial D4

Sleeping

- 7 Hotel Narmadha B2
- 8 Hotel Sun World B2
- 9 Hotel Tamil Nadu A3
- 10 Hotel Tri Sea B2

- 11 Manickhan Tourist

Home C1

- 12 Santhi Residency B2

- 13 Saravana Lodge C3

Eating

- 14 Hotel Seaview C2

- 15 Hotel Triveni B1

- 16 Sangam Restaurant C1

- 17 Sri Krishna C3

Transport

- 18 Autorickshaw Stand C1

- 19 SETC Booking Office C2

Hotel Narmadha

HOTEL \$

(☎246365; Kovalam Rd; r ₹250-400) This big concrete block conceals some friendly staff and a range of cheap rooms, some of which are better than others; the good-value ₹400 doubles with sea views had crisp white sheets when we visited, while the cheaper rooms didn't look so hot. It's popular with pilgrims and is set to the west of the main bazaar, next to Hotel Tri Sea.

Hotel Tamil Nadu

HOTEL \$

(☎246257; www.ttdconline.com; Beach Rd; r from ₹800; ☹) Despite the usual quirks of a government-run hotel (and – surprise – it's overpriced), this is a great location if you want to get away from the (slight) bustle of town; balcony rooms have ocean, though not temple, views.

Saravana Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎246007; Sannathi St; r ₹200-600) It's basic, but you can get a reasonable deal at this place just outside the temple entrance. All rooms have private bathrooms with squat toilets. A whole new block of rooms with a rooftop viewing platform should be complete by the time you read this.

Hotel Sun World

HOTEL \$\$

(☎247755; hotelsunworld@sancharnet.in; Kovalam Rd; d from ₹1500; ☹) Everything's very bright and glossy at this higher-end spot, where most rooms have a private balcony with fab three-ocean views.



Eating

There are plenty of fruit stalls and basic veg restaurants in the bazaar area, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hotel Saravana has two clean, busy veg restaurants with thalis (₹30).

Sangam Restaurant

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Main Rd; mains ₹55-190) It's as if the Sangam started in Kashmir, trekked across the entirety of India, and stopped here to open a restaurant that features top culinary picks culled from every province encountered along the way. The food is good and the joint is bustling. The biggest downer is a height-and-weight machine by the front door that calculates your BMI and lets you know if eating here has made you obese.

Sri Krishna

CAFE \$

(Sannathi St; mains ₹30-90) If you need fresh juice, good ice cream or Indian takes on pizza, chips and burgers, try this clean and busy corner cafe.

Hotel Seaview

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(East Car St; mains ₹60-200) This hotel has an excellent AC multicuisine restaurant specialising in fresh local seafood and posh takes on North and South Indian faves. The vibe is upmarket and waiters are very attentive.

Hotel Triveni

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Main Rd; mains ₹20-50) The fans might blow you clear into the ocean, but this place also has clean tables, efficient service and good-value, mainly South Indian veg dishes. A good spot for breakfast.

Information

Janaki Forex (☎9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Off South Car St. Change cash and travellers cheques here.

Tamil Mercantile Bank ATM (Main Rd)

Tony's Internet (Sannathi St; per hr ₹50; ☎10am-8pm) Friendly – possibly over-friendly (but not unsafe) if you're a lone woman.

Tourist office (☎246276; Main Rd; ☎8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

i Getting There & Away

Bus

The surprisingly sedate bus stand is a 10-minute walk west of the centre along Kovalam Rd and there's a handy **SETC booking office** (☎7am-9pm) on Main Rd. Almost all buses go via Madurai; the exception is the Rameswaram service. Buses from here include:

- Bengaluru** ₹430, 15 hours, daily
- Chennai** ₹390, 16 hours, seven daily
- Kodaikanal** ₹225, 10 hours, daily
- Madurai** ₹94, six hours, eight daily
- Ooty** ₹330, 14 hours, two daily
- Rameswaram** ₹145, nine hours, two daily

Train

The train station is about 1km north of the bazaar and temple. There are three daily trains to Chennai, the fastest of which is the *Kanyakumari Express*, departing at 5.20pm (sleeper/3AC ₹305/801, 13 hours) and stopping at Madurai and Trichy.

There are two daily express trains to Trivandrum (2nd class/3AC ₹30/238, two hours).

For the real long-haulers or train buffs, the weekly *Himsagar Express* runs all the way to Jammu Tawi, a distance of 3715km, in 70 hours – the longest single train ride in India. It departs 2pm Friday (sleeper/3AC ₹629/1741).

THE WESTERN GHATS

Welcome to the lush mountains of the Western Ghats, some of the most welcome heat relief in India. Rising like an impassable bulwark of evergreen and deciduous tangle from the north of Mumbai to the tip of Tamil Nadu, the Ghats (with an average elevation of 915m) contain 27% of all India's flowering plants, 60% of its medicinal plants and an incredible array of endemic wildlife. It's not just the air and (relative) lack of pollution that's refreshing, either – there's a general acceptance of quirkiness and eccentricity in the hills that is hard to find in the lowlands. Think hippie cafes, handlebar-moustachioed trekking guides and tiger-stripe earmuffs for sale in the bazaar. On the downside is the state of local tribal groups whose identity is in danger of both over-exploitation and assimilation.

Kodaikanal (Kodai)

☎04542 / POP 32,969 / ELEV 2100M

Kodai is small, intimate, misty and mountainous; there are few more refreshing Tamil Nadu moments than boarding a bus in the

heat-soaked plains and disembarking in the sharp pinch of a Kodaikanal night. It's not all cold though; during the day the weather is positively pleasant, more reminiscent of deep spring than early winter.

Located in the Palani knolls some 120km northwest of Madurai, Kodai clings to a mountainside draped in *sholas* (forests) of pine, gum trees and *kurinji* shrub, unique to the Western Ghats. The light, purple-blue-coloured blossoms flower every 12 years; next due date 2018. If you don't feel like waiting, the many treks by nearby dark rock faces and white waterfalls are still rewarding.

The renowned Kodaikanal International School provides a bit of cosmopolitan influence, with students from around the globe. Compared to Ooty, the town is relaxed (tourist brochures call it the 'Princess of Hills', while Ooty is the Queen), but it's still popular with Indian tourists (especially honeymooners). For a hill station, it's remarkably compact and the central town area can easily be explored on foot.

i Sights & Activities

Sacred Heart Natural History Museum

MUSEUM

(Sacred Heart College, Law's Ghat Rd; admission ₹5; ☎9am-5pm) In the extensive old college grounds (now being marketed as an 'eco sanctuary') a couple of kilometres out of town, this museum has a hodge-podge collection of flora and fauna put together over more than 100 years by Jesuit priests; the amateur (and therefore rather charming) nature of the collection is displayed through dodgy taxidermy, hand drawings, odd commentary, and old black-and-white photos of solemn-looking priests with huge snakes draped over them. There are some pleasant walks around the grounds.

Walking & Trekking

Assuming it's not cloaked in opaque mist, the valley views along paved **Coaker's Walk** (admission ₹3, camera ₹5; ☎7am-7pm) are superb. There's a small **observatory** (admission ₹3) with a telescope at the southern end. You can start near Greenlands Youth Hostel or Villa Retreat – where **stained glass** in the nearby Church of South India (CSI) is stunning in the morning light – and the stroll takes all of five minutes. The 5km **lake circuit** is pleasant in the early morning when you can count the kingfishers before the tourist traffic starts.

The views from **Pillar Rocks**, a 7km hike (one way, beginning near Bryant Park), are excellent (again, assuming fine weather), and there are some wonderful hiking trails through pockets of forest, including **Bombay Shola** and **Pambar Shola**, that meander around Lower Shola Rd and St Mary's Rd. You'll need a guide; talk to the staff at Greenlands Youth Hostel; other hotels might also be able to help. Guides of varying quality will approach you in the street.

Parks & Waterfalls

Near the start of Coaker's Walk is **Bryant Park** (adult/child ₹20/10, camera/video ₹30/75; ☀9am-6.30pm), landscaped and stocked by the British officer after whom it's named. **Chettiar Park** (admission free; ☀8.30am-5pm), about 1.5km uphill from town on the way to the Kurinji Andavar Temple, is small, pretty and landscaped. Both get crowded with school groups and canoodling couples. Nearby waterfalls include **Silver Cascade**, on the road outside Kodai and often full of interstate tourists bathing on the rocks, and compact **Bear Shola Falls**, in a pocket of forest about a 20-minute walk from the town centre.

Boating & Horse Riding

If you're sappy in love like a bad Bollywood song, the thing to do in Kodai is rent a pedal boat (₹50 per half-hour), rowboat (₹120) or Kashmiri *shikara* (covered gondola, aka 'honeymoon boat'; ₹260 including boatman) from either the Kodaikanal Boat and Rowing Club or Tamil Nadu Tourist Development Corporation; screechy crooning to your significant other is strictly optional.

There's a few horse-riding stands on the lake. The rate is ₹300 per hour unaccompanied or ₹400 with a guide.

Sleeping

Hotel prices can jump by as much as 300% during the high season (from 1 April to 30 June). Prices listed here are low-season rates. There are some lovely heritage places, and a couple of good-value midrange options if you live without colonial ambience.

Most hotels in Kodai have a 9am or 10am checkout time in high season, but for the rest of the year it's usually 24 hours.

TOP CHOICE **Carlton Hotel** HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎240056; www.krahejahospitality.com; Lake Rd; s/d/cottages from ₹6245/7130/10,695) The cream of Kodai's hotels is a magnificent

five-star colonial mansion that overlooks the lake and the international school. Rooms are bright, spacious and some have private balconies with lake views. The lobby and grounds very much succeed at re-creating hill station ambience, with stone walls, dark-wood flooring and roaring fireplaces that make you want to demand a scotch now, dammit, from the eager staff. There's a pricey and rather wonderful buffet lunch and dinner available.

Villa Retreat HOTEL \$\$
(☎240940; www.villaretreat.com; Club Rd; r ₹1350-2813, ste ₹3375) The terrace garden of this lovely old stone-built family hotel at the northern end of Coaker's Walk offers awesome valley views. Most rooms have fireplaces and TV; new rooms should be ready by the time you read this. Prices include taxes.

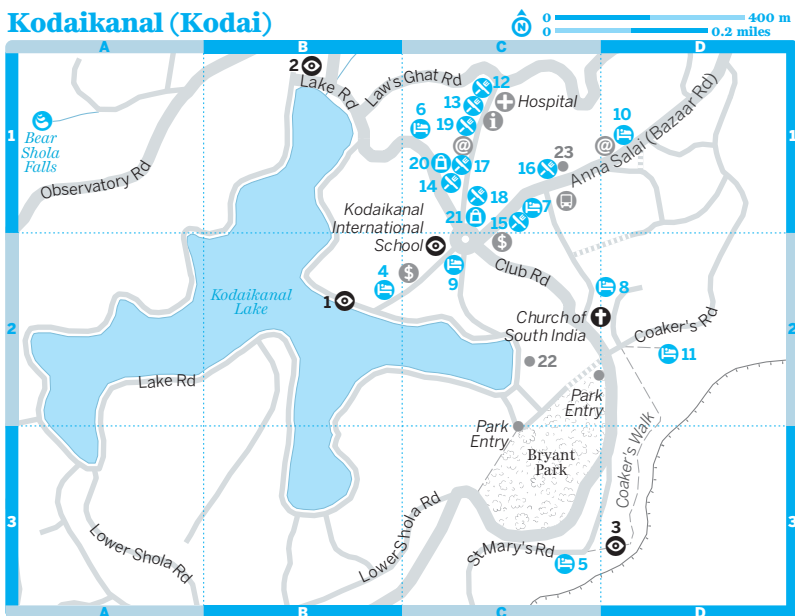
Hotel Cockers Tower HOTEL \$
(☎240374; cockers.tower@yahoo.com; Woodville Rd; dm/d ₹125/750) Just near the Church of South India, this is a clean, straightforward hotel with simple, light-coloured rooms (no colonial wood here). The dorm beds are narrow and reminiscent of train bunks, but the shared bathroom is sparkling and you can't top the price.

Hilltop Towers HOTEL \$\$
(☎240413; www.hilltopgroup.in; Club Rd; d from ₹1200) Although it comes off as boxy and corporate, rustic accents like polished teak floors and wooden embellishments, plus friendly staff and excellent upper-floor views, make the Hilltop a good midrange choice.

Hotel Astoria HOTEL \$
(☎240524; www.astoriaveg.com; Anna Salai; r from ₹700) You wouldn't expect it from the outside, which is mainly all about the popular restaurant (and we'll admit the curry smell occasionally wafts through the lower corridors), but this central hotel has clean, wood-floored, very pleasant rooms with colonial-style furniture. Prices are reasonable.

Greenlands Youth Hostel HOSTEL \$
(☎240899; www.greenlandskodaikanal.com; Coaker's Walk; dm ₹200, d ₹500-1800) We're a bit ambivalent about this popular, long-running spot; the grounds and views are excellent, guides can be organised here and it's a great spot to socialise with other budget travellers in the cosy, crowded dorms. But the rooms are overpriced (negotiating might lower

Kodaikanal (Kodai)



them), management can be unhelpful and hot water appears less often than is claimed.

RR Residency

HOTEL \$\$

(☎244301; rresidency@rediffmail.com; Boat House Rd; r ₹1490; 🍴) Tasteful artwork, comfy beds and slightly dank bathrooms for the price.

Snooze Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎240873; snoozeinns@jayarajgroup.com; Anna Salai; r from ₹600) The outside has a bit more character than the rooms, but this is another decent-value budget choice with clean bathrooms and plenty of blankets.

**Eating**

PT Rd is the best place for cheap restaurants and it's here that most travellers and students from the international school congregate.

Hotel New Punjab

NORTH INDIAN \$

(PT Rd; mains ₹30-100; 🍴lunch & dinner) For North Indian cuisine, including tandoori (and any nonveg curries in general), this is Kodai's favourite. It serves the best tandoori chicken in South India, according to locals.

Cloud Street

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(PT Rd; mains ₹50-200; 🍴lunch & dinner Tue-Sun, breakfast Sat & Sun) Why yes, that is a real Italian-style woodfire pizza oven. And yes, that's hummus, felafel and nachos on the menu,

alongside pasta and pizza – it's all great food in a simple, relaxed setting. (Also, ask the owners about their lovely homestay getaway 20km out of Kodai.)

Tava

INDIAN \$

(PT Rd; mains ₹40; 🍴lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) A clean, fast and cheap veg option, this place has a wide menu; try the cauliflower-stuffed *gobi paratha* (spicy cauliflower bread) and *sev puri* (crisp, puffy fried bread with potato and chutney).

Royal Tibet

TIBETAN \$

(PT Rd; mains ₹40-80; 🍴lunch & dinner) If you're missing Tibetan food, come here for the chewy but tasty *momos* (dumplings) and *thukpa* (noodle soup). A nearby competitor, **Tibetan Brothers**, offers almost the exact same menu; they're both good.

Red Apple

MULTICUISINE \$

(Anna Salai; mains ₹50-80; 🍴lunch & dinner) A pure-veg multicuisine spot (well there's a few Chinese dishes, as well as North and South Indian) that's cheap, clean and cheerful. There's a posh thali for ₹60. It's just opposite the bus stand.

Pot Luck

CAFE \$

(PT Rd; snacks ₹20-50; 🍴10.30am-7pm Wed-Mon) Sandwiches, pancakes, coffee and

Kodaikanal (Kodai)

📍 Sights

- 1 Boat Hire B2
 2 Horse Riding B1
 3 Observatory (Telescope House)..... D3

🏠 Sleeping

- 4 Carlton Hotel..... B2
 5 Greenlands Youth Hostel..... C3
 6 Hilltop Towers C1
 7 Hotel Astoria C1
 8 Hotel Cokkers Tower..... D2
 9 RR Residency C2
 10 Snooze Inn D1
 11 Villa Retreat..... D2

🍴 Eating

- 12 Cloud Street C1
 13 Eco Nut C1
 Hilltop Bake (see 6)
 14 Hotel New Punjab C1
 15 Pastry Corner C1
 Pot Luck (see 20)
 16 Red Apple C1
 17 Royal Tibet C1
 18 Tava C1
 19 Tibetan Brothers C1

🛒 Shopping

- 20 Cottage Crafts C1
 21 Re Shop C1

🚗 Transport

- 22 Bicycle Hire C2
 Bicycle Hire (see 2)
 Taxi Stand (see 16)
 23 Train Booking Office..... C1

quesadillas (!) served up on a pretty, tiny terrace attached to a pottery shop. There are delicious chutneys, lemon curd and biscuits to takeaway, too.

Hotel Astoria INDIAN \$

(Anna Salai; mains ₹30-50, thalis ₹35-60; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This veg restaurant is always packed with locals and tourists, especially come lunchtime when it serves excellent all-you-can-eat thalis.

Self-Catering

Excellent homemade chocolates and dried fruit are sold all over town.

Eco Nut HEALTH FOOD \$

(☎243296; PT Rd; ☺10am-5pm Mon-Sat) This interesting shop sells a wide range of locally produced organic health food –

wholewheat bread, muffins, cheese, salad greens – and essential oils, herbs and herb remedies.

Pastry Corner BAKERY \$

(Anna Salai; ☺9am-9pm) Pick up great picnic sandwiches and yummy brownies here, or squeeze onto the benches with a cuppa to watch the world go by.

Hilltop Bake BAKERY \$

(Club Rd; pastries ₹18-40; ☺11am-9pm) A wide range of fresh savoury pastries, including good approximations of pizza, as well as cakes and brownies.

🛍 Shopping

The many handicraft stores stock good craft-work, and several also reflect a local low-key but long-term commitment to social justice. On PT Rd you'll find small Kashmiri shops and South Indian handicrafts stalls.

Cottage Crafts HANDICRAFTS

(PT Rd; ☺10am-730pm) Run by the voluntary organisation Coordinating Council for Social Concerns in Kodai (Corsock), here you'll find goods crafted by disadvantaged groups, with about 80% of the purchase price returned to the craftspeople.

Re Shop HANDICRAFTS

(Seven Roads Junction; ☺10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Stylish jewellery, bags, cards and more, at reasonable prices, made by and benefiting village women around Tamil Nadu. It's run by the **Blue Mango Trust** (www.bluemangoindia.com).

📍 Information

Alpha Net (PT Rd; internet per hr ₹50; ☺9am-10pm)

Apollo Communications (Anna Salai; internet per hr ₹40; ☺9.30am-8pm)

Indian Bank (Anna Salai; ☺10am-2pm & 2.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Has a foreign-exchange desk.

Kurinji Tours & Travel (☎240008; kodai-kurinji@sancharnet.in; Club Rd; ☺9am-9pm) Reliable help with onward travel arrangements; also does foreign exchange.

State Bank of India ATM (Anna Salai)

Tourist office (☎241675; PT Rd; ☺10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) No brochures, maps or tours; 'just information, madam'.

📍 Getting There & Away

The nearest train station is Kodai Road, about two hours away at the foot of the mountain,

where taxis (around ₹1000) and buses (₹17) wait. There's a **train booking office** (off Anna Salai; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-5pm Sun) in town.

Don't expect a bus to depart from Kodaikanal immediately. Tickets for private buses can be booked at travel agents near the bus stand. Buses from Kodai include:

Bengaluru ₹283, 11 hours, daily

Chennai ₹230, 11 hours, daily

Coimbatore ₹74, five hours, two daily

Madurai ₹48, four hours, hourly

Ooty ₹260, eight hours, daily

Palani ₹34, two hours, 10 daily

Trichy ₹65, 5½ hours, four daily

i Getting Around

The central part of Kodaikanal is compact and very easy to get around on foot. There are no autorickshaws (believe it or not) but plenty of taxis willing to take you to various sightseeing points. Charges are fixed; sightseeing tours cost from ₹600 to ₹1200 for a day trip. There's a stand opposite the bus station.

If you fancy a ride around the lake or you're fit enough to tackle the hills, mountain bikes can be hired from several **bicycle stalls** (per hr ₹20; ☺8am-6pm) around the lake.

Around Kodaikanal

One of the better high-end escapes in the hills, about three hours' drive below Kodaikanal off the Palani-Dindigul road, is the fabulous **Cardamom House** (☎0451-2556765, 09360-691793; www.cardamomhouse.com; r from ₹3300). Created with love and care by a retired Brit, this comfortable guesthouse – at the end of a scenic road beside bird-rich Lake Kamarajar – runs on solar power; uses water wisely, farms organically, trains and employs only locals (who produce terrific meals), and supports several village development initiatives. You'll need to book well in advance, hire a driver to take you there, and prepare for some serious relaxation.

Coimbatore

☎0422 / POP 1.46 MILLION

Coimbatore may be one of the largest cities in Tamil Nadu, but most travellers use it as either a step towards getting into Ooty, or a step down from the hills and into Kerala. Which isn't a bad idea; this is a large business and junction city that's friendly enough (and its proximity to the hills means temperatures are just a little cooler than average),

but it's short on sights. Sometimes known as the Manchester of India for its textile industry, it's in the process of becoming a major IT centre. It has plenty of accommodation and eating options if you need to spend the night.

🛏 Sleeping

Legend's Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4350000; legends_inn@yahoo.com; Geetha Hall Rd; s/d from ₹900/990; 📞) Some of the best-value midrange rooms in town, with comfortable furnishings, bamboo blinds and shiny bathrooms.

Residency

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2241414; www.theresidency.com; 1076 Avanashi Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹4750/5100; 📞@📞) Coimbatore's finest hotel has all the five-star trimmings, along with friendly staff and immaculate rooms. There's a well-equipped health club and pool, two excellent restaurants, a coffee shop and a bookshop in the lobby.

Sabari's Nest

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4505500; nest.coimbatore@sabarihoteles.com; 739A Avanashi Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹2000/2300; 📞📞) A change of name and ownership doesn't seem to have damaged this long-standing favourite; rooms are very comfortable, with wooden floors and tasteful Audubon-esque prints of local birdlife.

Hotel ESS Grande

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2230271; hessgrande@gmail.com; Nehru St; s/d incl breakfast from ₹1300/1600; 📞@) The best of the bus-stand-adjacent hotels, the ESS has small but very clean, fresh rooms, and possibly the sparkliest bathrooms in Coimbatore.

Hotel Rathna Regent

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎4294444; www.rathnaregent.com; Avanashi Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹2800/3300; 📞📞) Not quite the top spot in town (hint: it's just opposite it), but a very comfortable place to lay your head all the same. The more expensive rooms are more like apartments, and all the facilities are here, including a couple of great restaurants, a bar and a cafe.

Hotel Shri Shakti

HOTEL \$

(☎2234225; Sastri Rd; s/d from ₹260/380; 📞) There's not much character here, but there are a lot of rooms, and probably the cheapest AC in town; if you need a cheap, basic place to crash that's near the bus stands, look no further.

Hotel AP

(☎2301773; hotelap@yahoo.com; s/d from ₹420/510, d with AC ₹990; 🍴) Basic, clean-enough rooms near the train station. The AP's tucked down a back street, but you'll recognise it by its oddly cubist exterior. Singles are real singles, not the usual single-occupancy doubles, and are a bit cell-like.

Eating

There's a fast-food hall and supermarket underneath Sabari's Nest hotel.

Malabar

(7 Sastri Rd; mains ₹60-120; 🕒lunch & dinner) INDIAN \$ In the KK Residency Hotel, this restaurant specialises in Keralan and North Indian food. The Keralan chicken roast (₹150 for half a chicken) is a spicy treat and there are seafood choices like crab masala.

Annalakshmi

(☎2212142; 106 Racecourse Rd; set meals ₹200; 🕒lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) INDIAN \$\$ The top veg restaurant in town, this is run by devotees of Swami Shatanand Saraswati; the price of your meal helps support underprivileged children.

Annalakshmi Hotel

(Geetha Hall Rd; mains ₹20-80) SOUTH INDIAN \$ A lot more down-market than the posh restaurant it probably borrowed its name from, but this cheap-and-

cheerful place is probably the best of the cluster of mainly South Indian restaurants on Geetha Hall Rd. Mushroom dishes are particularly good, and the biryani ain't bad.

KR Food Mall

(cnr State Bank & Geetha Hall Rds) INDIAN \$ Indian snacks and sweets all day, a good veg restaurant with a decent range of North and South Indian upstairs (breakfast, lunch and dinner), and an evening-only, super-popular halal takeaway stall that's heavy on spicy chicken dishes.

Naalukattu

(Nehru St; mains ₹50-140; 🕒lunch & dinner) SOUTH INDIAN \$ Like a dark-wood-accented Keralan veranda, with Malayalam-inspired food that's all good – especially the seafood.

Hot Chocolate

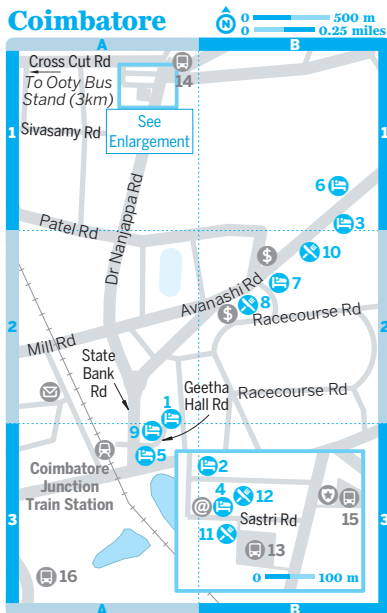
(Avanashi Rd; mains ₹80-200; 🕒lunch & dinner) WESTERN \$\$\$ Not bad at all if you're hankering after cakes, pasta or burgers.

Information

There's a string of internet joints along Geetha Hall Rd, opposite the train station, all charging about ₹20 per hour.

HSBC ATM (Racecourse Rd) Next to Annalakshmi restaurant.

Oscar Browsing Centre (cnr Kalingaray & Sastri Sts; per hr ₹20; 🕒9.30am-10pm) Internet access near the bus stands.

**Coimbatore**** Sleeping**

- 1 Hotel APA2
- 2 Hotel ESS Grande.....B3
- 3 Hotel Rathna Regent.....B1
- 4 Hotel Shri Shakti.....B3
- 5 Legend's Inn.....A3
- 6 Residency.....B1
- 7 Sabari's Nest.....B2

 Eating

- 8 AnnalakshmiB2
- 9 Annalakshmi Hotel.....A3
- 10 Hot Chocolate.....B2
- KR Food Mall.....(see 5)
- 11 MalabarB3
- 12 Naalukattu.....B3

Transport

- 13 Central Bus StationB3
- 14 Thiruvalluvar Bus StationA1
- 15 Town Bus StandB3
- 16 Ukkadam Bus StationA3

State Bank of India ATM (Avanashi Rd) Opposite Sabari's Nest.

VKC Forex (Raheja Centre, Avanashi Rd; ☎9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Currency exchange and travellers cheques cashed, next door to the Residency hotel.

i Getting There & Away

Air

The airport is 10km east of town, with domestic flights to many destinations, including Chennai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Kochi. SilkAir also runs three flights a week direct to/from Singapore. Airlines include **Air India** (☎2399833), **Jet Airways** (☎2243465), Kingfisher Airlines, **SilkAir** (☎4370271) and SpiceJet.

Bus

There are three bus stands in the city centre.

From the Central bus station services depart to northern destinations such as Salem and Erode. From Thiruvalluvar bus station you can catch regular state and interstate buses to Bengaluru (₹180 to ₹230, nine hours), Mysore (₹80 to ₹100, five hours) and Chennai (₹300, 11½ hours). The Town bus stand is for local city buses.

Ukkadam bus station, south of the city, is for buses to nearby southern destinations, including Palani (₹35, three hours), Pollachi (₹16, one hour) and Madurai (₹74, five hours). The Ooty bus stand, aka 'new bus stand', is a couple of kilometres west of the centre on the Mettupalayam road; regular services run to Mettupalayam (45 minutes), Ooty (3½ hours; via Coonoor) and Kotagiri.

Taxi

A taxi up the hill to Ooty (2½ hours) costs about ₹1500; Ooty buses are often so crowded that it's an option worth considering.

Train

Coimbatore Junction is on the main line between Chennai and Ernakulam (Kerala). For Ooty, catch

the daily 12671 *Nilgiri Express* at 5.15am; it connects with the miniature railway departure from Mettupalayam to Ooty at 7.10am. The whole trip to Ooty takes about seven hours. For other train services, see the boxed text, p1050.

i Getting Around

For the airport take bus 20 from the Town bus stand or bus 90 from the train station. Many buses run between the train station and the Town bus stand, and between the Central bus station and Ooty and Ukkadam stands. Autorickshaw drivers charge around ₹50 between the bus and train stations. An autorickshaw from the centre out to the Ooty bus stand will cost up to ₹100 depending on your bargaining skills.

Around Coimbatore

The **Isha Yoga Center** (☎0422-2515345; www.ishafoundation.org), an ashram in Poondi, 30km west of Coimbatore, is also a yoga retreat and place of pilgrimage. The centrepiece is a multi-religious temple housing the Dhyanalangam, said to be unique in that it embodies all seven chakras of spiritual energy. Visitors are welcome to the temple to meditate, or to take part in yoga courses, for which you should register in advance.

The commercial town of **Mettupalayam** is the starting point for the miniature train to Ooty. There's little of interest for travellers, but if you want to sleep in a little longer before you catch the train, there is plenty of accommodation. There are various cheap lodges right by the bus and train stations, and **Hotel EMS Mayura** (☎04254-227936; 212 Coimbatore Rd; r ₹700, with AC ₹1200; ☎), a fine, clean, bland midrange hotel with a decent restaurant, is just 1km from the train station.

MAJOR TRAINS FROM COIMBATORE

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURE
Bengaluru	6525 <i>Island Express</i>	191/505	7½	10.50pm
Chennai*	2672 <i>Kovai Express</i>	132/471	7½	2.20pm
	2674 <i>Cheran Express</i>	232/594	8½	10.20pm
Kochi	7230 <i>Sabari Express</i>	122/311	5	8.35am
Madurai	6610 <i>Nagercoil Express</i>	155/404	6	8.30pm

*2nd class/AC chair

All other fares sleeper/3AC

Coonoor

📍0423 / POP 101,000 / ELEV 1850M

Coonoor is one of the three Nilgiri hill stations – Ooty, Kotagiri and Coonoor – that lie above the southern plains. Like Kotagiri, Coonoor is a place for quiet and isolation, and it's emerging as a centre for foodies and upmarket homestays. From Upper Coonoor's accommodation, 1km to 2km above the town centre, you can look down over the sea of red-tile rooftops to the slopes behind and soak up the peace, cool climate and beautiful scenery. Just note you get none of the above in central Coonoor, which is a bustling, honking mess.

👁 Sights & Activities

There are several popular viewpoints around Coonoor. **Dolphin's Nose**, about 10km from town, exposes a vast panorama encompassing **Catherine Falls** across the valley. **Lamb's Rock**, named after the British captain who created a short path to this favourite picnic spot in a pretty patch of forest, has amazing views past the hills into the hazy plains. The easiest way to see these sights – all on the same road – is on a rickshaw tour for around ₹500. If you're feeling energetic, walk the 6km or so back into town from Lamb's Rock (it's mostly, but not entirely, downhill).

Sim's Park

PARK

(adult/child ₹10/5, camera/video ₹25/250; 🕒8.30am-6pm) In Upper Coonoor, the 12-hectare Sim's Park is a peaceful oasis of manicured lawns and more than 1000 plant species, including magnolia, tree ferns and camellia. Buses heading to Kotagiri can drop you here.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

You'll need a rickshaw (or good legs) to reach all these places. If you're self-catering, try the **Green Shop** (Jograj Bldg, Bedford Circle) for honey and other local goodies, and the well-stocked supermarket in **Tulsi Mall** for a range of packaged Western goods.

TOP CHOICE 180 Mclver

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍2233323; 180mciver@gmail.com; Mclver Villa, Orange Grove Rd; d incl breakfast ₹3000-4500) A French couple has turned the four bedrooms in this classic Nilgiri bungalow into something really special; bright-coloured walls, antique furniture and floorboards, working fireplaces and big fresh bathrooms

blend French and local sensibilities in the best possible way. The multicuisine restaurant, **La Belle Vie**, uses organic produce and has guests driving a long way to sample the Indian-French menu (mains ₹140 to ₹350).

Acres Wild

FARMSTAY \$\$\$

(📍2232621; www.acres-wild.com; Upper Meanjee Estate, Kannimariamman Kovil St; cottages incl breakfast ₹2000-4000) This gorgeously situated farm outside Coonoor makes cheese like you've never tasted in India, and invites guests to help in the production. Cottages are simple and stylish, with fireplaces for chilly nights and views over the valley; your hosts are friendly and the food is great. No walk-ins – book in advance.

Tryst

GUESTHOUSE \$\$\$

(📍2207057; www.trystindia.com; s/d incl breakfast & dinner ₹5500/6600) If you're looking for a gregarious accommodation experience that's quirky and classy, check out the website of this extraordinary guesthouse and book ahead. It's beautifully located in a former tea plantation manager's bungalow.

YWCA Wyoming Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍2234426; ywcacoonoor@gmail.com; s/d ₹500/700) This ramshackle guesthouse, a hill-station gem of a structure nestled into an upslope of Upper Coonoor, is a budget favourite. Although ageing and draughty, the 150-year-old colonial house oozes character with wooden terraces and serene views over Coonoor.

Hotel Vivek Coonoor

HOTEL \$

(📍2230658; www.hotelvivek.com; Figure of Eight Rd; r from ₹600) A good 'upper budget' option. Many of the wide range of rooms here have balconies (screened to avoid the 'monkey menace') from which you can watch the tea fields.

📍 Getting There & Away

Coonoor is on the miniature train line between Mettupalayam (28km) and Ooty (18km) – see p1059. Buses to Ooty (₹8, one hour) and Kotagiri (₹10, one hour) leave roughly every 15 minutes.

Kotagiri

📍04266 / POP 29,184

The oldest of the three Nilgiri hill stations, Kotagiri is about 28km from Ooty. It's a quiet, unassuming place with a forgettable town centre, but we're assuming you're not

here for the nightlife. Rather, the appeal is the escape from the overdevelopment in Ooty: red dirt tracks in the pines, blue skies and the high green walls of the Nilgiris.

From Kotagiri you can visit **Catherine Falls**, 8km away near the Mettupalayam road (the last 3km is by foot only, and the falls only flow after rain), **Elk Falls** (6km) and **Kodanad Viewpoint** (22km), where there's a view over the Coimbatore Plains and Mysore Plateau. A half-day taxi tour to all three will cost around ₹800. The scenery on the road to Mettupalayam is gorgeous, so you may want to detour this way if you're heading down from Ooty.

If you've any interest at all in the history of the Nilgiris, it's worth visiting the **Sullivan Memorial** (Nilgiri Documentation Centre; ☎9486639092; Kannerimukku; ⌚10am-5pm Mon-Sat). The bungalow that belonged to John Sullivan, the founder of Ooty, has been refurbished and filled with fascinating photos and artefacts about local tribal groups, European settlement and icons like the toy train. Call if nobody's there, or to arrange visits out of hours.

Also located here are the offices of the **Keystone Foundation** (☎272277; www.keystone-foundation.org; Groves Hill Rd), an NGO that works to improve environmental conditions in the Nilgiris while working with, and creating better living standards for, indigenous communities. The foundation's **Green Shop** (Johnstone Circle) has goodies for picnics – local organic cheese, honey and more.

A couple of very basic lodges are in the small town centre, and you won't go short of *idlis* or dosas. A combination of splendid 1915 colonial building and flashy new block, **Nahar Retreat** (☎273300; www.naharretreat.com; r from ₹2000) has very comfortable rooms, great views and a very simple veg restaurant, but charges a lot for extras. Closer to the centre, **Hope Park** (☎271229; www.hopeparkhotel.com; r from ₹1200) has big, clean rooms, a decent restaurant and friendly staff.

Buses stop at the edge of town, about 1km from the centre. Buses to Ooty depart hourly (₹12, 1½ hours), crossing one of Tamil Nadu's highest passes. Buses to Mettupalayam leave every 30 minutes and to Coonoor every 15 minutes.

Ooty (Udhagamandalam)

☎0423 / POP 93.921 / ELEV 2240M

Ooty may be a bit bustling for some tastes, but most travellers quickly fall in love with this pine-clad retreat, where trekkers con-

gregate in front of roaring fires before setting out into the surrounding green dream. Even the typical chaos of India becomes somehow subdued in the shadow of the hills. Therein lays Ooty's charm, especially when you throw in her quirks: a jumble of Hindu temples and ecotourism, overlaid by a veneer of manicured British aesthetic.

This is South India's most famous (and certainly best-named) hill station, established by the British in the early 19th century as the summer headquarters of the then-Madras government and memorably nicknamed 'Snooty Ooty'. Development ploughed through a few decades ago, and continues, but somehow old Ooty survives – you just have to walk a bit further out from the town centre to find it.

The journey up to Ooty on the miniature train is romantic and the scenery stunning – try to get a seat on the left-hand side where you get the best views across the mountains. With that said, even the bus ride is pretty impressive (if not nearly as relaxing). From April to June (the *very* busy season) Ooty is a welcome relief from the hot plains, and in the colder months (October to March) you'll need warm clothing – which you can buy cheap here – as overnight temperatures occasionally drop to 0°C.

The train station and bus station are next to the racecourse, which is surrounded by cheap hotels. Further downhill is the lake, while the valley slopes up on either side, studded with colonial houses and guest lodges with good views. From the bus station it's a 10-minute walk to the bazaar area and a 20-minute walk to Ooty's commercial centre, Charing Cross. Like Kodai, Ooty has an international school whose students can often be seen around town.

👁️ Sights

St Stephen's Church

CHURCH

(Church Hill Rd; ⌚10am-1pm & 3-5pm Mon-Sat, services 8am & 11am Sun) Perched above the town centre, the immaculate St Stephen's Church, built in 1829, is the oldest church in the Nilgiris. Throughout its history, St Stephen's has racially shifted from hosting an exclusively British congregation to an Anglo-Indian orphanage to falling under the auspices of the Church of South India. Look out for lovely stained glass, huge wooden beams hauled by elephant from the palace of Tipu Sultan some 120km away, and the sometimes kitschy, sometimes touching, slabs and plaques donated by colonial-era

churchgoers. In the quiet, overgrown cemetery you'll find headstones commemorating many an Ooty Brit, including the wife and daughter of John Sullivan, the town's founder. If you're partial to colonial cemeteries, the quiet yard overlooking the lake at **St Thomas Church** (Racecourse Rd) is also worth a wander.

Botanical Gardens

GARDEN

(adult/child ₹20/10, camera/video ₹30/75; ☀7am-6.30pm) Established in 1848, these lovely gardens are a living gallery of the natural fauna of the Nilgiris. Look out for a fossilised tree trunk believed to be around 20 million years old, and on busy days, roughly 20 million Indian tourists.

Doddabetta Lookout

VIEWPOINT

(admission ₹5; ☀7am-6pm) This is it: the highest point (2633m) of the Nilgiris and one of the best viewpoints around, assuming, as usual, the day is clear. It's about 10km out of town; go early for better chances of a mist-free view. Any Kotagiri buses will drop you at the Doddabetta junction, from where it's a fairly energetic 3km walk or a quick jeep ride. A taxi will do the round trip from Charing Cross for ₹350.

Centenary Rose Park

GARDEN

(Selbourne Rd; adult/child ₹20/10, camera/video ₹30/50; ☀9am-6.30pm) With its terraced lawns

and colourful flowerbeds – best between May and July – this terraced rose garden is a pleasant place for a stroll. There are good views over Ooty from the hilltop location.

Thread Garden

GARDEN

(☎2445145; North Lake Rd; admission ₹10, camera/video ₹15/30; ☀8.30am-8pm) If your expectations aren't too high, you may enjoy the 'miracle' (official description and just *slight* hyperbole) that is 150 species of 'plants' from around the world meticulously re-created using 'hand-wound' thread. The technique was perfected by Keralan artist Anthony Joseph and the work took 50 craftspeople 12 years to complete.

Tribal Research Centre Museum

MUSEUM

(Muthorai Palada; admission free; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Fri) It's hard to say why you should love this museum more than most: for its decently executed exhibits on Nilgiri and Andaman tribal groups, or the decomposing corpses of badly stuffed local wildlife, including a rotting mongoose that just arrived from hell's deepest pit. Seriously, the artefacts are fantastic – you may never get the chance to hold a Stone Age bow in your life again – and descriptions of the tribes are good, if written by anthropologists with no filter from academia to normal English. The museum is just beyond the village of Muthorai Palada

Nilgiri Hills

0 10 km
0 5 miles



HILL TRIBES OF THE NILGIRI

For centuries, the Nilgiris have been home to hill tribes. While retaining integrity in customs, dress and language, the tribes were economically, socially and culturally interdependent. The British concept of exclusive property rights disenfranchised many tribespeople, as did exploitative commercial practices that undermined their barter-based economy. Today, many eke out a living in poverty gathering honey or herbs for the ayurveda industry.

The Toda tribe's social, economic and spiritual system centred on the buffalo, whose milk and ghee was integral to their diet and used as currency – in exchange for grain, tools and medical services. Most importantly, the dairy produce provided offerings to the gods as well as fuel for the funeral pyre. It was only at the ritual for human death that the strictly vegetarian Toda killed a buffalo, not for food but to provide company for the deceased.

The Badagas are believed to have migrated to the Nilgiris from the north around 1600 AD, in the wake of Muslim invasions in the north, and are thus not officially a tribal people. With knowledge of the world outside the hills, they became effective representatives for the hill tribes. Their agricultural produce, particularly grain, added a further dimension to the hill diet.

The Kotas lived in the Kotagiri area and were considered by other tribes to be lower in status. They still undertake ceremonies in which the gods are beseeched for rains and bountiful harvests.

The Kurumbas inhabited the thick forests of the south. They gathered bamboo, honey and materials for housing, some of which were supplied to other tribes. They also engaged in a little agriculture, and at sowing and harvest times they employed the Badaga to perform rituals entreating the gods for abundant yields.

The Irulus, also from the southern slopes, produced tools and gathered honey and other forest products that they converted into brooms and incense. They are devotees of Vishnu and often perform rituals for other tribes.

British colonialism and lowland migration have undermined tribal cultural systems to the point of collapse. Displaced tribes have been 'granted' land by the Indian government, but the cultivation of land is anathema to the Toda, who see themselves as caretakers of the soil – for them, to dig into the land is to desecrate it.

Today many tribal people have assimilated to the point of invisibility. Some have fallen into destructive patterns associated with displacement and alienation, while others remain straddled across two cultures.

(M Palada), 11km from Ooty on the way to Emerald. Catch any of the frequent buses heading to M Palada and walk from there, or hire a rickshaw from Ooty for around ₹300 return. Note that opening times can be a bit iffy.



Activities

Trekking

Trekking is pretty much de rigueur in Ooty and the reason most travellers come here. On day trips you'll have a wander through evergreen forest, tea plantations, over look-outs, into local villages and, generally, catch a bus back to town. Most guesthouses will set you up with guides, or you can hire your own – plenty will offer their services to you. Expect to pay depending on the size of your group, ₹300 to ₹900 for a full-day trek. For

other nearby hiking options, consider the resorts near Mudumalai National Park.

Horse Riding

Alone or with a guide, you can hire horses outside the boathouse on the north side of the lake; the rides mostly consist of a short amble along bitumen, although you can explore the woods and hills for more money. Prices run from ₹50 for a short ride to ₹100 to ₹200 for an hour (more with a guide), which takes you partway around the lake. Some horses look in pretty bad shape. A white horse will cost you more – do ask the guide why that is.

Boating

Rowboats can be rented from the **boat-house** (admission ₹5; ☀9am-5.30pm) by the artificial lake (created in 1824). Prices start

from ₹80 for a two-seater pedal boat (30 minutes) and go up to ₹280 for a 15-seater motorboat (20 minutes).

Horse Racing

Ooty's racecourse dominates the lower part of the hill station between Charing Cross and the lake. The horse-racing season runs from mid-April to June and on race days the town is a hive of activity; it's an event you can't miss if you're in town. Outside the season, the 2.4km racecourse just becomes a cricket field/trash dump/public toilet.

Tours

The tourist office can put you in touch with agencies that run day trips to Mudumalai National Park via the Pykhara Dam. Trips to Coonoor and surrounds are also possible. A better alternative is to hire a taxi for the day and go as you please. Rates run for about ₹800 for a four-hour trip around Ooty, or ₹1600 to ₹1800 for a full day depending on where you're heading.

Sleeping

Ooty has some good rustic lodges in the budget-midrange scale, gorgeous colonial-era residences at the high end, and even some decent backpacker dosses. Be warned: it's a sellers' market in the high season (1 April to 15 June), when many hotel prices double and checkout time is often 9am. Prices listed here are for the low season when most places are good value.

Hotel Sweekar HOTEL \$

(☎2442348; Race View Rd; d ₹350-400) Definitely the best value for money in town, the Sweekar hosts guests in simple but very clean rooms in a traditional Ooty cottage that sits at the end of a lavender-lined path. It's run by an incredibly friendly Bahai manager.

Willow Hill HOTEL \$\$

(☎2223123; www.willowhill.in; 58/1 Havelock Rd; d ₹900-2000) Sitting high above town, Willow Hill's large windows provide great views of Ooty. The rooms, all with wooden floors, have a distinct alpine chalet chic, with the most expensive rooms offering a private garden.

Fernhills Palace HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2443911; www.fernhillspalace.co.in; Fernhill Post; 2-night packages ₹13,250-33,950) The Maharaja of Mysore's summer palace has been lovingly restored in colourfully gorgeous,

ridiculously over-the-top princely colonial style; if you can afford to stay here, you really should. Play billiards, walk in the garden and check out old photos of the Ooty Hunt while sipping Scotch in the atmospheric Fox Hunt Bar.

YWCA Anandagiri HOTEL \$

(☎2442218; www.ywcaooty.com; Ettines Rd; dm from ₹99, r from ₹345) This former brewery and sprawling complex of hill cottages is dotted with flower gardens; throw in elegant lounges and fireplaces and you've got some excellent budget accommodation going on. High ceilings can mean cold nights; ask for extra blankets if you think you might need them.

Hotel Welbeck Residency HOTEL \$\$

(☎2223300; www.welbeck.in; Club Rd; r from ₹1800) An attractive older building that's been thoroughly tarted up with very comfortable rooms, a touch of colonial class (miniature cannons at the front door!) and a good restaurant. Staff are very helpful.

King's Cliff HOTEL \$\$

(☎2224545; www.littlearth.in; Havelock Rd; d from ₹1475) High above Ooty on Strawberry Hill is this gorgeous residence, a colonial house with wood panelling, antique furnishings and cosy lounge. If you plan on living large, Raj style, go for the more expensive rooms; the cheaper doubles don't quite reflect the old-world charm of the rest of the place. To really get out into the hills, ask the staff about **Destiny**, their delightful farmstay property an hour's drive from Ooty.

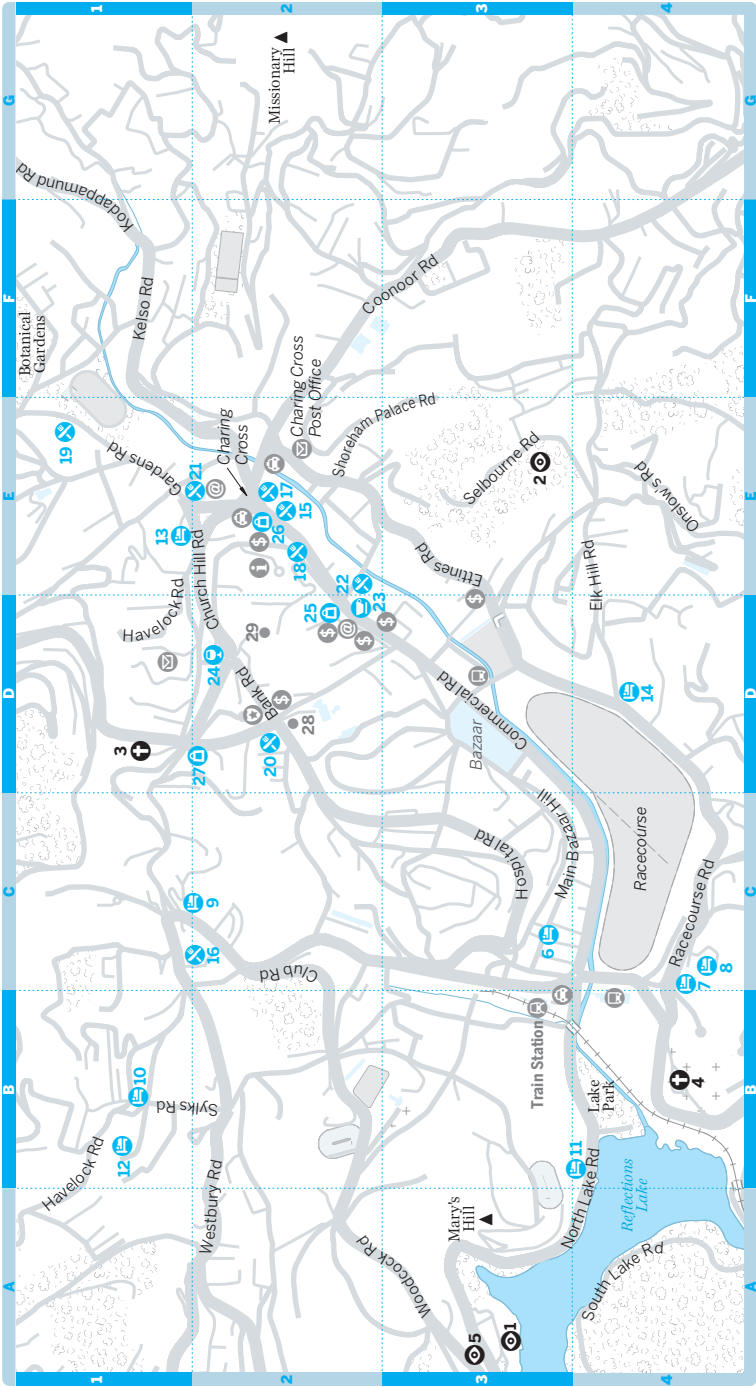
Lymond House HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2223377; www.serendipityo.com; 77 Sylks Rd; d from ₹2250) If Mucha and F Scott Fitzgerald partnered up to open a hotel in Ooty, it'd probably come out looking something like this restored English villa. Rooms are all ensconced in Old World/Jazz Age opulence, the dining room (with limited, but very good, menu) and gardens are gorgeous, and the period atmosphere is thick enough to swim in.

Savoy Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2444142; www.tajhotels.com; 77 Sylks Rd; s/d from ₹5800/6800; 🏠) The Savoy is one of Ooty's oldest hotels, with parts dating back to 1829. Big cottages are arranged around a beautiful garden of flowerbeds, lawns and clipped hedges. The quaint rooms have large bathrooms, polished floors, log fires and bay windows. Modern facilities include a

Ooty (Udhagamandalam)



Ooty (Udhagamandalam)

📍 Sights

- 1 Boathouse (Boat & Horse Hire) A3
- 2 Centenary Rose Park E3
- 3 St Stephen's Church D1
- 4 St Thomas Church B4
- 5 Thread Garden A3

🏠 Sleeping

- 6 Hotel Maneck C3
- 7 Hotel Mountview C4
- 8 Hotel Sweekar C4
- 9 Hotel Welbeck Residency C2
- 10 Lymond House B1
- 11 Reflections Guest House B4
- 12 Savoy Hotel B1
- 13 TTDC Youth Hostel E1
- 14 YWCA Anandagiri D4

🍴 Eating

- 15 Garden Restaurant E2
- 16 Green Shop C2
- 17 Hotel Blue Hills E2

- 18 Kabab Corner E2
- 19 Modern Stores E1
- 20 Shinkow's Chinese Restaurant D2
- Sidewalk Café (see 15)
- 21 Virtue Bake E2
- 22 Willy's Coffee Pub E2

☕ Drinking

- 23 Barista D2
- Barista (see 9)
- 24 Café Coffee Day D2
- Café Coffee Day (see 19)

🛍 Shopping

- 25 Big Shop D2
- 26 Higginbothams E2
- 27 Higginbothams D2
- Mahaveerchand (see 6)

Information

- 28 Nilgiri Library D2
- 29 Office of the Field Director D2

24-hour bar; wi-fi, an excellent multicuisine dining room and an ayurvedic centre.

Hotel Mountview

HOTEL \$

(☎2443307; Racecourse Rd; r ₹660-1700) Perched on a quiet driveway directly above the bus station, this elegant old bungalow has eight simple, enormous (no, really) rooms, all wood lined and high ceilinged and slightly draughty, with unused fireplaces. There's enough untapped renovation potential here to make a decorator weep.

Reflections Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎2443834; North Lake Rd; d ₹500-700) Judging by reader feedback, there must be two Reflections. One has helpful and welcoming staff, good food, and a great common area that's excellent for meeting other hill-bound travellers and trekkers. The other has curt staff who demand extra cash for everything from loo rolls to blankets. Either way, rooms are clean and decent value, and the setting very pleasant.

Hotel Maneck

HOTEL \$

(☎2443494; Main Bazaar; r ₹600-800) A small, friendly Jain-run hotel in the market; the slightly more expensive rooms are clean and comfortable.

TTDC Youth Hostel

HOTEL \$

(☎2443665; yhttdc@yahoo.in; Gardens Rd; dm/d from ₹100/350) This state-run hostel is reli-

ably mediocre, clean and busy; you may want to call ahead to book a dorm bed if you're in the area.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

Ooty has two branches each of **Café Coffee Day** and **Barista**, both with the usual range of reliably fine coffee, tea, cakes and sandwiches; the Club Rd branch of Barista has nice views and does a good toast-and-eggs breakfast. The more upmarket hotels all have atmospheric, multicuisine restaurants.

For self-caterers, **Modern Stores** (Garden Rd) is a mini-supermarket with all kinds of Western packaged food, as well as Nilgiri-produced bread and cheese, and the **Green Shop** (Club Rd) has honey, cheese and other local foods. **Virtue Bake** (Charing Cross) has excellent cakes, pastries and brownies to take away.

Kabab Corner

NORTH INDIAN \$\$

(Commercial Rd; mains ₹60-200; ☺lunch & dinner) This is the place for meat eaters who are tiring of the nonstop veg of South India. It might not look like much from the outside, but here you can tear apart perfectly grilled and spiced chunks of lamb, chicken and, if you like, paneer, sopping up the juices with pillowy triangles of naan. The ₹450 tandoori platter is exceptionally good if you're in a group; if there's fewer than four of you, it may defeat you.

Garden Restaurant

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Nahar Hotel, Commercial Rd; mains ₹50-90; ☺lunch & dinner) Slightly upmarket South Indian food in a clean hotel-restaurant setting, along with juices, ice creams, snacks and even pizza; the pizza's made in the hotel's **Sidewalk Café**, which has good vegetarian Western food at fairly high prices.

Shinkow's Chinese Restaurant

CHINESE \$\$

(☎2442811; 38/83 Commissioner's Rd; mains ₹50-150; ☺lunch & dinner) Shinkow's is an Ooty institution and the simple menu of chicken, pork, beef, fish, noodles and rice dishes is reliably good and quick to arrive at your table.

Hotel Blue Hills

INDIAN \$

(Commercial Rd; mains ₹20-80; ☺lunch & dinner) Downstairs, dimly lit and feeling slightly disreputable, Blue Hills has been serving up good meals, huge crispy dosas and a range of other Indian standards for decades.

Willy's Coffee Pub

CAFE \$

(mains ₹30-80; ☺lunch & dinner) Climb the stairs and join international students and local cool kids for board games, magazines and very reasonably priced pizzas, fries, toasted sandwiches, cakes and cookies.

**Shopping**

The main places to shop are along Commercial Rd, where you'll find Kashmiri shops as well as government outlets for Kairali and Khadi Gramodyog Bhavan. The **Big Shop** (Commercial Rd) sells lovely new and antique jewellery and knick-knacks at fairly inflated prices. For cheaper but equally attractive silver and Toda (tribal) jewellery, there's a string of shops stretching along Main Bazaar in the direction of the train station; **Mahaveerchand** (291 Main Bazaar), next to Hotel Maneck, sells particularly nice work. Near the entrance to the botanical gardens you'll find Tibetan refugees selling sweaters and shawls, which you may appreciate on a chilly Ooty evening.

Higginbothams Commercial Rd (☎2443736;

☺9am-1pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat); Commissioner's Rd (☎2442546; ☺9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Has a good selection of contemporary English-language Indian and other fiction, and Lonely Planet guides.

**Information****Internet Access**

Global Net (Commercial Rd; per hr ₹30; ☺9.30am-9pm)

Cyber Planet (Garden Rd; per hr ₹30; ☺10am-7.30pm)

Library

Nilgiri Library (Bank Rd; temporary membership ₹200; ☺9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm, reading room 9.30am-6pm Sat-Thu) Quaint little haven in a crumbling 1867 building with a collection of more than 40,000 books, including rare titles on the Nilgiris and hill tribes. Unless you're a student it costs an extra ₹500 for temporary membership if you want to actually take a book away with you.

Money

Axis Bank ATM (Commercial Rd)

Canara Bank (Commercial Rd) The only bank in town that does cash advances on credit cards.

State Bank of India (Bank Rd; ☺10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and has an ATM.

State Bank of India ATM (Commercial Rd)

UK Forex (137 Commercial Rd) Changes travellers cheques and cash.

UTI Bank ATM (Ettines Rd)

National Park Information

Office of the Field Director (☎2444098; fdmtr@tn.nic.in; ☺10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Manages Mudumalai National Park, including advance bookings for park accommodation.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☺2443977; ☺10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Maps, brochures and tour information.

i Getting There & Away

Without doubt the most romantic way to arrive in Ooty is aboard the miniature train, and you'll need to book ahead in the high season. Buses also run regularly up and down the mountain, both from other parts of Tamil Nadu and from Mysore in Karnataka.

Bus

The state bus companies all have **reservation offices** (☺9am-5.30pm) at the busy bus station. There are two routes to Karnataka – the main bus route via Gudalur and the shorter, more arduous route via Masinagudi. The latter is tackled only by minibuses and winds through 36 hairpin bends! Frequent buses leave for Mettupalayam and Coimbatore, and there's daily service to Chennai, Bengaluru and Mysore.

Connect with trains to Chennai or Kochi (Cochin, Kerala) at Coimbatore.

To get to Mudumalai National Park (₹30, 2½ hours, 11 daily), take one of the Mysore buses that will drop you at park headquarters at Theppakadu, or one of the small buses that go via the

narrow and twisting Sighur Ghat road. Some of these rolling wrecks travel only as far as Masinagudi (₹16, 1½ hours), from where there are buses every two hours to Theppakadu.

Local buses leave every 30 minutes for Kotagiri (₹10, 1½ hours) and every 10 minutes to Coonoor (₹12, one hour).

Train

The miniature train – one of the Mountain Railways of India given World Heritage status by Unesco in 2005 – is the best way to get here. There are fine views of forest, waterfalls and tea plantations along the way, especially from the front 1st-class carriage; the steam engine pushes, rather than pulls, the train up the hill, so the front carriage leads the way. Note that this route has been suspended on and off in the last few years after heavy rains led to landslides over the tracks; it was back on schedule at the time of research.

Departures and arrivals at Mettupalayam connect with those of the *Nilgiri Express*, which runs between Mettupalayam and Chennai. The miniature train departs Mettupalayam for Ooty at 7.10am daily (1st/2nd class ₹142/21, five hours). If you want a seat in either direction, be at least 45 minutes early or make a reservation at least 24 hours in advance.

From Ooty the train leaves at 3pm and takes about 3½ hours. There are also three daily passenger trains between Ooty and Coonoor (₹15, 1½ hours).

i Getting Around

Plenty of autorickshaws hang around the bus station – a ride from the train or bus stations to Charing Cross costs about ₹40, and lists of autorickshaw fixed prices can be found at the steps on Commercial Rd leading to the tourist information office, at the lake and outside the Botanical Gardens.

Taxis cluster at several stands in town. There are fixed fares to most destinations, including Coonoor (₹600), Kotagiri (₹800), Gudalur (₹1200), Mudumalai National Park (₹900) and Coimbatore (₹1800).

There's a jeep hire near the main bazaar, although it's best to rent these out in groups; expect to pay about 1.5 times more than local taxi fares.

Mudumalai National Park

0423

In the foothills of the Nilgiris, this 321-sq-km park is like a classical Indian landscape painting given life: thin, spindly trees and light-slotted leaves concealing spotted chital deer and slow herds of gaur (Indian bison).

Somewhere in the hills are tigers, although you're very lucky if you spot one.

Part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (3000 sq km), the park is the best place for spotting wildlife in Tamil Nadu, although there's still a good chance you won't see more than some deer and kingfishers. Vegetation ranges from grasslands to semi-evergreen forests to foothill scrub; besides the above species, panthers, wild boars, jackals and sloth bears prowl the reserve. Otters and crocodiles both inhabit the Moyar River, and the park's wild elephant population numbers about 600.

A good time to visit is between December and June, although the park may be closed during the dry season (February to March). Heavy rain is common in October and November.

The main service area in Mudumalai is Theppakadu, on the main road between Ooty and Mysore. Here you'll find the park's **reception centre** (☎2526235; ☀6.30-9am & 3-5.30pm) and some park-run accommodation. The closest village is Masinagudi, 7km from Theppakadu.

👁 Sights & Activities

It's not possible to hike in the park and tours are limited to sanctuary minibuses; private vehicles are not allowed in the park except on the main Ooty–Mysore road that runs through it. Most people see the park via the fun 45-minute **minibus tours** (per person ₹35, camera/video ₹ 25/150) that run between 7am and 9am and 3pm and 6pm. The tour makes a 15km loop through part of the park in buses painted in camouflage stripes.

You can also hire a guide for a foot **trek** outside the park boundaries, but the only way to do this safely and legally is through one of the better resorts, where guides are experts who know where it's OK to walk. Tourists have been killed after getting too close to wild elephants on dodgy treks, and park rules have since tightened up considerably.

Early-morning **elephant rides** in the jungle are available but must be booked in advance at the Office of the Field Director in Ooty (p1058); it costs ₹460 per group of four.

Near the reception centre, and sharing the same hours, the **elephant camp** (per person ₹15) is a spot on the river where you can watch elephants being fed and bathed in the morning or evening.

Sleeping & Eating

There are budget and midrange lodges inside the park at Theppakadu; budget rooms and midrange cottages in Masinagudi; and midrange and upmarket jungle resorts in Bokkapuram (4km south of Masinagudi). For meals at the resorts, expect to pay from ₹400 per person per day.

IN THE PARK

For most accommodation in the park, book in advance, in person, with the Office of the Field Director (p1058) in Ooty. The first three places listed here are park-run accommodation on the banks of the river and are all walking distance from park reception.

Minivet Dormitory HOTEL \$
(q ₹310) A simple place, with two four-bed rooms, each with private bathroom with cold water only. Expect vociferous demands for extra rupees for the most basic services here.

Theppakadu Log House HOTEL \$\$
(d/q ₹1030/1500) Comfortable rooms, well maintained.

Sylvan Lodge HOTEL \$\$
(d/q ₹530/1080) Not a very big drop in quality from Log House, and with the addition of a kitchen that prepares meals for booked guests.

Hotel Tamil Nadu HOTEL \$
(2526580; dm/d/q ₹125/550/950) A nearby government-run hotel providing basic accommodation and meals.

BOKKAPURAM

This area south of Masinagudi is home to a gaggle of fine forest resorts, mostly family-run businesses with a warm, homely atmosphere, high standards and breathtaking views. Don't wander outside your resort at night; leopards, among other wild animals, are very much present.

Jungle Retreat RESORT \$\$
(2526469; www.jungleretreat.com; dm ₹525, bamboo huts/standard r ₹1969/2532, tree house ₹4500; ☎) One of the most stylish resorts in the area, with lovingly built stone cottages decked out in classic furniture and sturdy bamboo huts, all spread out to give a feeling of seclusion. It's possible to camp, and there's a dormitory for groups. The bar, restaurant and common area is a great place to meet fellow travellers and the owners are knowledgeable and friendly, with a large area of private forest at their disposal. The

pool and its setting are stunning. All prices include taxes.

Jungle Hut RESORT \$\$
(2526463; www.junglehut.in; s/d incl taxes & 3 meals ₹2970/4000) Similar in style to Jungle Retreat, with cottages spread across the property, this resort has the best food in Bokkapuram (if you're visiting the restaurant from another resort after dark, don't walk home on your own!). If you're up for fishing you can relax by the ponds fed from waterfalls you can see in the distant hills.

Safari Land Resort RESORT \$\$
(2526937; www.safarilandresorts.com; r from ₹1800, tree house from ₹3500; ☎) This jungle complex has comfortable rooms and cottages as well as well-decked-out tree houses above a gurgling stream. The views into the surrounding jungle hills are stunning, but the pace, for all the dramatic scenery, is supremely relaxed. Your host is a Hyderabad prince and former rifle-shooting champ.

Forest Hills Guest House RESORT \$\$
(2526216; www.foresthillsindia.com; r incl taxes from ₹1743) Forest Hills is a family-run, family-sized guesthouse (10 rooms on 5 hectares) with a few cute bamboo huts, some clean spacious rooms, and a fabulous watchtower for wildlife-watching and birdwatching. There's a slight colonial air here with a gazabo-style bar, games rooms and a barbecue pit. It's popular with Indian families.

Bear Mountain Jungle Retreat RESORT \$\$
(2526505; www.bearmountainjungleresort.com; cottages from ₹2000) Good for groups, this resort has stunning jungle and mountain views and simple, clean rooms.

Getting There & Around

Bus services run every two hours between Theppakadu and Masinagudi (7km); shared jeeps ply this route for ₹7 if there's enough passengers, or you can have one to yourself for ₹100. Costs are similar for jeeps between Masinagudi and Bokkapuram.

Buses from Ooty to Mysore and Bengaluru stop at Theppakadu (2½ hours, 11 daily). There's another, more direct route between Ooty and Masinagudi, an interesting 'short cut' (₹13, 1½ hours, 36km) which involves taking one of the small government buses that make the trip up (or down) the tortuous (but very pretty) Sighur Ghat road. The bends are so tight and the gradient so steep that large buses simply can't use it, and accidents are not uncommon. A taxi from Ooty to Masinagudi using this route takes an hour and costs ₹750.

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