

OVERNIGHTER

Pondicherry, South India

This quaint coastal town of nostalgia-soaked French villas and bright bougainvillea is the ideal getaway locale, says Isabel Putinja

“Do you speak French?” asks the Tamil man when I stop him to ask for directions. “My French is better than my English.” I’m aware that French was at one time widely spoken in Pondicherry, but I’m still surprised at the lingering Gallic influence in this small seaside city in South India.

Indeed, Pondicherry boasts many vestiges of its French colonial past: streets with names like Rue du Bazar Saint Laurent, signs like the one over the doorway of the Public Works Department that reads *Travaux Publics* and the bright red *kepis* (French military caps) worn by police officers. Also, as I’ve just learned, French is still spoken by many older Pondichériens.

The mix of European and Indian influences can be seen most vividly in the city’s unique

architecture. On the quiet, tree-lined streets of the French Quarter, sandwiched between the seafront and the canal, are colourful colonial-style villas with elaborate gateways and high walls concealing gardens of bougainvillea. In the bustling Tamil Quarter beyond the canal are many examples of traditional Tamil houses with their characteristic street verandas, carved doors, ornamental parapets and inner courtyards.

It is this mélange of East and West that so intrigues visitors from overseas and offers Indian tourists a change of scenery. Pondicherry is a popular weekend destination for out-of-town visitors looking to relax, enjoy great continental food and hit the bars in a place where alcohol is cheaper and more readily available than it is in neighbouring states.

WHAT TO DO

The best way to explore the city’s rich architectural heritage is on foot. Pick up a map at the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), located in a beautifully restored Tamil-style house. The map lists the buildings that have been renovated and often converted into stylish shops, hotels and restaurants. Many are in the French Quarter but don’t miss Rue Calvé Subbraya Chetty in the Tamil Quarter, which is home to many examples of a unique Franco-Tamil style of architecture, and Rue Mulla and Rue Cazy in the Muslim neighbourhood with their traditional Tamil row houses.

Pondicherry is a great place to pick up local handicrafts like pottery, handmade paper, incense, textiles, artwork and antique furniture. La Boutique d’Auroville offers an eclectic selection of eco-friendly products made in the nearby international township of Auroville. La Maison Rose recently opened in a newly-restored colonial-style mansion with three stylish boutiques and a pleasant garden café.

Living Art features a select collection of furniture, home wares and decorative items.

The city’s many eateries and garden cafés serve everything from traditional South Indian to French *nouvelle* to Creole fusion. The courtyard restaurant at Maison Perumal offers delectable Franco-Tamil dishes made with fresh local ingredients. Another good option is the gourmet restaurant at Le Dupleix.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel de l’Orient, set in a restored 18th-century mansion on a leafy street in the French Quarter, is home to 14 rooms and two suites. The nearby Villa Helena has seven rooms decorated with antique furniture and artwork. In the Tamil Quarter is the newly opened Anantha, a heritage home built in the Franco-Tamil style.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Chennai airport, Pondicherry is a two-and-a-half hour drive down scenic East Coast Road.

FIND IT:

- **INTACH**, 62 Rue Aurobindo, tel: +91 (0)41 3222 5991, www.intachpondicherry.org
- **La Boutique d’Auroville**, 38 Nehru St, tel: +91 (0)41 3233 7264
- **La Maison Rose**, 8 Romain Rolland St, tel: +91 (0)41 3421 0808
- **Living Art**, 14 Bazar Saint Laurent, tel: +91 (0)41 3430 8773, http://livingartindia.com
- **Maison Perumal**, 44 Rue Perumal Koil, tel: +91 (0)41 3222 7519, www.cghearth.com
- **Le Dupleix**, 5 Rue de la Caserne, tel: +91 (0)41 3222 6999, www.sarovarhotels.com
- **Hotel de l’Orient**, 17 Rue Romain Rolland, tel: +91 (0)41 3234 3067/68, www.neemranahotels.com
- **Villa Helena**, 13 Lal Bahadur Shastri St, tel: +91 (0)41 3222 6789
- **Anantha**, 96 Rue Perumal Koil, tel: +91 (0)41 3222 0605, www.ananthaheritage.com

PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTOLIBRARY

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

1 HO CHI MINH CITY
This seaport city is home to many heritage buildings dating back to the French colonial period. Its elegant boulevards and colonial-style structures are remnants of its past status as the “Paris of the Orient”.
www.vietnamtourism.com

2 MACAU
This is another seaside destination with a distinctive European feel and many architectural vestiges of its Portuguese colonial past. Its historical centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
www.macautourism.gov.mo



Adrenalin Overdrive

Looking for an all-day rush? Head to Singapore’s Sentosa Island for a day of play that’s sure to leave you breathless

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Wave House Sentosa with its Double FlowRider and 3m Flow Barrel sheet wave attractions is the place to experience the California surfer lifestyle. Follow up with all-night parties on Fridays and Saturdays.

MegaZip Adventure Park is home to a triple-level obstacle course in the Mount Imbiah treetops that ends with a zip-line descent. One of the world’s steepest rides, it whisks fliers from a forest tower 72m high along a 450m flying fox.

Jewel Cable Car Ride is a new attraction that offers 360-degree views of the city, harbour, sea and Sentosa. Enhanced eight-seat cabins with flip-up seats for wheelchairs and prams enable everyone to enjoy the adrenalin rush.

Skyline Luge Sentosa, the first attraction of its kind in South-East Asia, is part go-cart, part sled. Navigate down the 650m-long Jungle Trail or the 688m-long Dragon Trail as fast or as slowly as you like.

Tiger Sky Tower offers panoramic views of Sentosa and Singapore’s southern islands, as well as parts of Malaysia and Indonesia, from 50 storeys up. Relax in air-conditioned comfort in Singapore’s tallest observatory tower.

www.sentosa.com.sg