

# The French Connection

Walk through the streets of history and soak in some Gallic charm, says SMITHA SADANANDAN.

Sunshine and simplicity sprinkled with a distinct Gallic charm beckons travellers to Pondy, as it is nicknamed. Pondicherry is a three-hour drive from Chennai city.

## STREETSCAPE

Travel towards the beachfront and you will see the Catholic churches, wide stone-paved streets, colourful facades with wooden shutters oozing vintage splendour, colonnades and former governor's residences dotting the landscape. Many of the heritage buildings (most were residences of former Governors during the French regime) and facades of houses have been restored to its former glory by INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). Walk down Vysial Street and an interesting streetscape with traditional thalavarams and thinnais (continuous verandahs) greet you – all of which were also restored as part of the Model Street Restoration Project.

It may be difficult to imagine any part of India, especially a popular tourist des-

tinuation, without tall buildings, traffic jams, drivers honking horns and blaring music. Not here though. Life, in this tiny coastal town, ambles at its own pace. Lunch time is when the laidback attitude becomes a lot more visible. Shopkeepers pull down make-shift blinds and nap in the shade, vendors take a break, employees in nearby offices chill out post-lunch. Birds too seem to take a cue from the people, occasionally piercing the afternoon silence with the flutter of wings and a tweet or two.

Well-heeled travellers – armed with maps and guidebooks, French tourists, families and couples explore the Beach Boulevard and the quiet rues (streets). You are unlikely to lose your way here; all the rues have blue signboards in Tamil and French. In case you need directions, ask the locals. The people in Pondicherry are genial and helpful, and are happy to guide tourists to popular sites.

If you have a nose for food, wander through Bussy Street. Yummy desserts, warm Med-

iterranean breads and French baguettes, soft and crispy croissants - huddling in the glass counters - tempt you endlessly. The Baker Street is a must stop for a foodie. If you are a vegetarian, restaurants in the coastal town offer you enough and more choices. The Surguru hotel offers delicious vegetarian meals and a healthy South Indian breakfast. And if you are a non-vegetarian and love seafood, Pondicherry offers a gamut of options. The restaurants at Le Dupleix, Hotel Du Parc, Hotel de l'Orient all serve delicious food. For seafood, try Rendezvous - the last time this writer dined at the restaurant, their seafood was quite nice. Heard the standards have dipped a little now.

## SIGHT-SEEING

No trip to Pondicherry is complete without some sightseeing. Wander through Bharati Park; then take a coffee break at Le Café adjacent to the beach. Click some pictures with Gandhiji's statue on the beach and later on, hop into the museum for a quick lesson in history. Head to the antique stores and scour for beautiful artefacts. Go on a shopping spree at the Aurobotique, Fab India and Casablanca. Browse through the shelves of the Hi-Design store and pick up some lovely items; they are quite a steal. If you are an art lover, visit the Aurodhan Art Gallery; it has a fine collection of Indian art. For a good seaside view, head to

the lighthouse and click some more pretty pictures for facebook.

## SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Since you are here, take time off to visit the Aurobindo ashram and the Matrimandir. The golden, dimpled orb in the ashram is awe inspiring. You may not exactly be a spiritual seeker, but the philosophy behind the Utopian township of Auroville, the sustainable living this community promotes, Auroville's concerted efforts to uplift the people, and the many small-scale manufacturing units it runs all open myriad windows to a peaceful world. [S](#)

## FACT FILE

### DO REMEMBER

Puducherry is the official name. The best way to discover the town is on foot. People here sleep early and the shops do not remain open till late. Eating roasted corn or sipping mocktails on the beachfront in the evening may not be fun if you forget to pack a mosquito repellent cream/spray.

### HOW TO REACH

The closest airport is Chennai. Travel by train/car/bus. The nearest railhead is Villupuram.

### WHERE TO STAY

Le Dupleix- An elegant colonial villa-turned luxury heritage hotel on Rue De La Caserne (Rs.5,000+). Hotel de l'Orient - A dilapidated mansion that has been given a stylish makeover, located on Rue Romain Rolland (Rs.3,500+ to Rs.7,000+). Hotel du Parc - A charming, comfortable place on Jawaharlal Nehru Street (Rs.2,800+). The resorts are outside the town's limit. If you are a spiritual person or are seeking some quiet, you could stay at the Park Guest House, Auroville Ashram (do make the reservations in advance). Alternatively, you may look up some of the neat, nice budget hotels in the town.

### SECRET

Get hold of a guide (who knows the whereabouts of the leather factories) and drive to the outskirts of the city. Get a purse, bag, belt custom-made; you won't have to part with a lot of dough for good leather accessories here.

### SHOPPING

Casablanca on Mission Street (stocks designer clothes), Nirvana and Renaissance Antiques are worth a visit.



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