



A World Apart

South India Kaleidoscope

January 10 – 23, 2024

A CELEBRATION OF THE UNIVERSE

Under a dazzling sun, the brilliant colors of South India – red silk saris, shimmering classical dance costumes, luminescent green rice paddies and rainbow-hued frangipani flowers – astound with a kaleidoscopic display. The temples and jungles are a riot of color. The world view of South Indians is essentially one celebrating the eternal universe. Reverence for the beauty of the body and motherhood is exemplified through dance, clothing, and sculpture. The Hindu religion is the most prevalent, and the massive temple complexes in the south are India's heart and soul. One shrine in Kerala attracts more pilgrims than Mecca!

South India is one of the most relaxed and congenial parts of Asia to explore. Accommodations are clean, and freshly cooked, nutritious food is readily available. The widespread use of English makes communication relatively easy. South Indians are the most garrulous and inquisitive of travelers, and public encounters are always enlivened by questions about where you are traveling and where you come from.

Our journey begins in the Tamil Nadu state, whose capital is Chennai (formerly Madras). Tamil Nadu is known as the cradle of Dravidian culture, and the icons of this unique civilization are everywhere – huge temples, intricate rock carvings, evocative music and complex classical dance. We work our way south along the coast, exploring massive temple complexes along the way. In Madurai we join in the Pongal Festival, dedicated to thanking the Sun God for an abundant harvest. Moving gradually inland to the beautiful highlands with their colorful tea plantations, we cross into Kerala and a stunning resort on the lush backwaters, eventually ending in beautiful Cochi.

This tour features the best of Southern India's cities, beaches, culture, flora and fauna. Come with Toto Tours to experience a world apart. Your own will never be the same again.

Day 1, Jan 10: Arrival in Chennai (Madras), evening. Met at airport and transfer to Trident Hotel, near airport.

Day 2, Jan 11: Chennai-Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram)/ Hotel Radisson Blu GRT Temple Bay / (B,L,D)
Relaxed morning.

Late morning at 10 am start a city tour of Chennai, including the Kapileswar temple, dedicated to Shiva, which attracts thousands of devotees. These are living temples where you

will see local residents as well as pilgrims who come from afar, in acts of devotion. It is quite a striking experience.

Next we visit the excellent State Museum and National Art Gallery (Friday closed).

We will have lunch in Chennai at local restaurant.

Afterwards, drive to Mahabalipuram, enroute visit Dakshina Chitra (**Tuesday Closed**), a wonderfully conceived Folk Museum that showcases the rich architectural and artistic heritage of South India. All of the traditional buildings have been painstakingly reconstructed with original materials and the exhibitions express many craft traditions. There are also some artists demonstrating their traditional crafts and technique

On arrival, check-in to the hotel. This evening at leisure. Welcome dinner at the hotel restaurant.

Day 3, Jan 12: Mahabalipuram (B,D)

After leisurely breakfast we will visit the Government College of Sculpture to gain an interesting insight into the process of sculpture training

Next, we visit world's 2nd largest Seashell Museum is none other than India Seashell Museum. On the other hand, a totally of 40,000+ different kinds of seashells are available in Chennai Museum, which is collected from all over the world. There are some seashells as small as coriander seeds. India Seashell Museum is not only for Seashell museum, it also includes Pearl museum, Virtual reality Show and an Aquarium. Raja Mohamed goes all around the globe to research seashells and collecting as much as he can and brings out the famous museum.

Return to hotel, lunch on your own and bit of free time.

This afternoon tour of the city including the Five Rathas, Ajunas Penance and Shore Temples just before sunset.

The Five Rathas, also known as Panch Rathas, is a exemplary set of rock temples. They are excellent examples of the evolution of Dravidian style architecture.

These temples are built in the same shape as pagodas, and greatly resemble Buddhist shrines and monasteries. The rathas are associated with the great epic Mahabharata. The first ratha that is located right by the entrance gate is Draupadi's Ratha. It is shaped like a hut and is dedicated to the goddess Durga. Next comes Arjuna's Rath. This one has a small portico and carved pillar stones and is dedicated to Lord Shiva. There are no carvings inside this temple, but many are on the outside. Directly in front of Arjuna's Rath is the Nakula Sahadev Rath. This ratha has some huge elephant sculptures included that are a huge draw for the Five Rathas. It is dedicated to the God of Rain, Lord Indra. The Bhima Rath is huge. It measures 42 ft in length, 24ft in width, and 25ft in height. The pillars there do contain lion carvings even though the ratha as a whole is incomplete. The largest of the Five Rathas is the Dharamraja Yudhistar's Rath. This rath is also dedicated to Lord Shiva.

The Arjuna's Penance is an enormous rock-cut relief, one of the largest in the whole world. It is also known by the name 'Descent of the Ganges' because the structure depicts either or

both of these two significant and symbolic events of Hindu mythology; thus making this attraction spot a favourite among historians, scholars, academics as well as tourists who are enthusiastic about the cultural past of India.

Shore Temple: Built during the 7th century, Shore Temple is one of the oldest South Indian temples constructed in the Dravidian style and depicts the royal taste of the Pallava dynasty.

Day 4, Jan 13: Mahabalipuram – Pondicherry (120 km / 2.5hrs) / Maison Perumal (B,D)

After breakfast leave to Pondicherry, officially known as Puducherry, and commonly referred to as just Pondy, is one of the seven Union Territories of India which is bounded by the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This former French colony is a perfect amalgamation of the traditional Indian sensibilities and French architecture, making it a dreamy escape that offers the best of both worlds.

The streets of the French Quarter of Pondicherry, also known as White Town, are dotted with charming mustard-yellow colonial structures with bougainvillea laden walls. These are interspersed with cosy cafes and chic boutiques that offer delectable French cuisine and beverages.

This afternoon we shall visit Sri Aurobindo's Ashram (a meditation centre), founded by the poet philosopher Sri Aurobindo, and the Mata Mandir, a center of meditation and an architectural marvel in Auroville.

Afterwards, we will go to Auroville Beach, situated near to Auroville. Popularly known among the locals as Auro Beach, it offers a picturesque landscape with the crystal blue waters and the phenomenal sunrise and sunset.

Day 5, Jan 14: Pondichery – Tanjore (180 km / 5hrs) / Great Trails River View Resort (B,L,D)

Today, we drive to Tanjore, flourished during the rule of the Nayaks & Mahrattas. It has been the treasure house of art for centuries. It is called the Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu. Thanjavur is well-known throughout the world for its exquisite handicrafts like the Art Plate, pithwork, bronze icons, Thanjavur paintings & the classical South Indian musical instruments.

We will have lunch enroute at Kumbakonam in Sterling Swamimalai or Paradise Resort.

In the late afternoon, we visit Brihadeshwara temple, also known as Big Temple, built by Rajaraja Chola I was completed around 1010 CE.

This 10th century CE temple, one of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, is a brilliant example of the Dravidian

Style of temple architecture. The beautiful Chola Fresco paintings on the inner walls of the temple are no way less than Ajanta paintings

**Day 6, Jan 15: Tanjore – Madurai (190 km / 5hrs) / Heritage Madurai (B,L,D)
Happy Pongal**

Pongal, is one of the major festivals celebrated in South India, particularly by the Tamil communities. The festival is dedicated to Sun God praying and thanking him for the abundance in agricultural produce. Pongal is observed on the first day of the month of Thai (according to Tamil calendar), usually falling on January 14th or 15th every year. This harvest festival is celebrated throughout India under many regional names. Pongal is Tamil Nadu's Harvest Thanksgiving Festival. Pongal festival is observed for three days beginning with Bhogi Pongal, followed by Surya Pongal, Mattu Pongal and Kanum Pongal.

Morning visit to a small village near Tanjore for Pongal festival celebration. We will interact with local people and observe the activities followed by Lunch with the family members.

The second day is the main day of Pongal and is celebrated as Surya Pongal. On this day, the Sun God is honoured. Colourful decorative floor patterns called kolam are drawn at the entrance of one's home, and each household cooks a pot of fresh rice with milk at auspicious timings.

As the milk boils freely over the pot, family members shout out happily "Pongalo Pongal"! After the Pongal is offered to the Sun God, they would feast on several Pongal dishes that are prepared especially for the day.

Later we leave for Madurai via Trichy drive past Rock Fort Temple (if time permits...)

Madurai is a center of Tamil culture, famous for its writers and poets, its history goes back to the 6th century BC. The Nayakas laid out the old town in the pattern of a lotus with narrow streets surrounding the Minakshi Temple at the center. Minakshi, known as the Fish-eyed Goddess and the consort of Siva, is the presiding deity and daily ceremonies are performed at her shrine.

Upon arrival check in to hotel, the remainder of the day is free for independent activities. Dinner at hotel restaurant.

Day 7, Jan 16: Madurai (B,D)

This morning we drive to Meenakshi Temple to tour it with ample time to meander inside and see the details without the large crowds and frenzy of the previous night. The temple was built in the Dravidian style of temple architecture. The Gopurams are covered from top to bottom with profuse multi-colored images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythical figures. The main temple has long galleries and large halls supported by columns. The Hall of 1000 Columns has musical pillars. We'll also visit the Nayyaka Palace, built in 1636 in the Indo-Saracenic style.

Return to the hotel for lunch on your own and enjoy a bit of relaxed time.

Afternoon visit Vilacheri, a pottery village on the outskirts of city. This potter's village where villagers create handmade mud dolls that adorn traditional Hindu households. You can also enjoy a walk around the weaver's village at Kaithirinagar, watching the weavers weave beautiful saris and interacting with the locals.

Evening take cycle-rickshaws to the Meenakshi Temple to witness the nightly spiritual ceremony (pooja) in which Lord Shiva is carried in a palanquin and accompanied by musicians, temple singers and priests to the temple of his consort, Parvati, to spend the night. He is brought back to his temple in the morning. Dinner at Rooftop Restaurant.

Day 8, Jan 17: Madurai – Periyar (150 km / 4 hrs) / Spice Village / (B,D)

Following an early breakfast, check-out from the hotel and drive to Thekkady; on arrival check-in into hotel.

After lunch on your own, we will take a boat ride on Lake Periyar to view wildlife. This area is home to bison, sambars, wild boars, monkeys, nilgiri langurs, a wide variety of birds, and some 750 elephants.

Day 9, Jan 18: Periyar – Munnar (100 km / 3.5 hrs) / Windermere Estate (B,L,D)

After breakfast drive to Munnar, situated at the confluence of three mountain streams - Mudrapuzha, Nallathanni and Kundala. 1,600 m above sea level, this hill station was once the summer resort of the erstwhile British Government in South India. En route stop at water fall for photography.

Check into hotel, have lunch and some rest..

Late afternoon we will take Windermere plantation tour (approx 4 km). Hotel host this walk through the Windermere plantation for their guest.

Day 10, Jan 19: Munnar (B,L,D)

Morning half day sightseeing tour of Munnar and visit the, Mattupetty Dam, Eco point, Tea estates, Tea Museum and back Hotel.

Eravikulam (Rajamalai) National Park; which is a 30 minutes drive from Munnar town. The main attraction of this park is the 'Nilgiri Thaars' - a rare species of mountain goats, protected here.

Day 11, Jan 20: Munnar - Kumarakom (150 km / 5hrs) / Coconut Lagoon (B,L,D)

Depart to Kumarakom, an unbelievably beautiful paradise of mangrove forests, emerald green paddy fields and coconut groves interspersed with enchanting waterways and canals adorned with white lilies. Situated on the Vembanad Lake, this small water world has plenty of traditional country boats, crafts and canoes which will take you in to the heart of scenic Kerala.

Check into your hotel, the remainder of the day is free for independent activities. Or enjoy the hotel facilities. Lunch & dinner at hotel restaurant.

Day 12, Jan 21: Kumarakom (B/L)

Today after breakfast. We board on to snake boats for a day tour of the canals in the back waters of Kerala. A Martial art show ie., Kalarai Dance and Lunch will be arranged for you in one of the villages. Return to your hotel for the overnight at Coconut Lagoon.

Day 13, Jan 22: Kumarakom – Cochin (2hrs) / Forte Kochi or similar (B,D)

After breakfast drive to Cochin (2hrs) a very popular & historical sea trade connection with Middle East, Mediterranean Europe, Dutch & British. It has one of the finest natural harbours on the Arabian coastline. Its cosmopolitan character is reflected in the buildings & structures representing different regions of the world.

Upon arrival check-in to hotel. Lunch on your own.

Afternoon half-day sightseeing with an easy walk around the heritage zone including visits to St. Francis Church, where Vasco da Gama was buried for 14 years before his remains were transferred to Lisbon. His tombstone still stands there. The church was built in 1503 by Portuguese Franciscan friars. Nearby is the Mattancherry Palace or "Dutch Palace" built in 1557 AD. The central hall on the 1st floor was the coronation hall of the rajas of Cochin. Other rooms depict scenes from the Ramayana and Puranic Legends connected with Hindu gods.

Next we'll see the Chinese Fishing Nets along Vypeen Island (set up between 1350 - 1450 AD). These cantilevered fishing nets were introduced by traders from the courts of Kublai Khan.

Farewell dinner in one of the nice restaurant.

Day 14, Jan 23: Cochin – Depart (B)

We depart the hotel at 9 am for our tour including the Jewish Synagogue, constructed 1568 AD, with hand-painted willow-pattern floor tiles brought from Canton in the mid-18th century by a Rabbi who had trading interests there. Afterwards you'll have time to browse the market area nearby, including the well-known antique shops.

Return to the hotel for lunch on your own. The remainder of the day is free for independent activities. Room reserved till late night. We will organize airport transfers for those flying out tonight. Let us know if you wish to extend your stay in Cochi.