



# Tamil Nadu

If thoughts of temples and tigers appeal, then Tamil Nadu – land of the Tamils and heartland of southern India – is the place to be. Long coastlines and forested mountains form stunning backdrops to this, the cradle of Dravidian civilisation. Manifestations of its ancient culture are everywhere, from vast temple compounds with steeply stepped, riotously coloured *gopurams* (gateway towers) to beautifully detailed rock carvings, and classical music and dance that are both complex and compelling. Pilgrims pour into the ancient sites of Kanchipuram, Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Trichy (Tiruchirappalli), Thanjavur (Tanjore), Madurai, Kanyakumari and Rameswaram – far outnumbering tourists.

While only the very lucky few will see a tiger, the state's national parks and reserves remain important refuges for much of India's wildlife including elephants, several species of rare monkeys and gaurs (a type of bison). The historic hill stations of Ooty (Udhagamandalam), reached by the famous miniature train, and Kodaikanal are perfect bases for exploring and provide cool, calm, green contrast to the bustle of the cities.

The eastern coast fronting the Bay of Bengal has a few resorts and sleepy fishing villages, but Tamil Nadu isn't a beach destination and only Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), south of Chennai (Madras), attracts chilled-out tourists. The 2004 tsunami swept along this coast; rehabilitation was comparatively swift near tourist areas, but many local communities are still recovering.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge on fresh seafood and explore some of South India's finest rock carvings in laid-back **Mamallapuram** (Mahabalipuram; p1044)
- Ride the toy train, stay in a Raj-era hotel and trek the hills around **Ooty** (Udhagamandalam; p1098)
- Experience a small corner of France in India and an early morning yoga session in **Puducherry** (Pondicherry p1057)
- Join the pilgrims and devotees filing into Madurai's **Sri Meenakshi Temple** (p1082), a riot of Dravidian sculpture and one of South India's finest
- Dust off the binoculars and field guides around **Mudumalai National Park** (p1104), where Tamil Nadu's best wildlife viewing is on your doorstep
- See local artisans practising their crafts in traditional workshops at **DakshinaChitra** (p1044), a remarkable cultural centre on the coast road south of Chennai (Madras)
- Watch the sun rise and set over two oceans at **Kanyakumari** (p1085), on the southernmost tip of the continent



**FAST FACTS**

- Population: 62.1 million
- Area: 130,058 sq km
- Capital: Chennai (Madras)
- Main language: Tamil
- When to go: November to March

**History**

It's thought the first Dravidians were part of early Indus civilisations and that they came south to the area about 1500 BC. 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 – the Sangam Age – that continued until around AD 300.

The domains of these three dynasties changed many times over the centuries. The Pallava dynasty became influential, particularly in the 7th and 8th centuries, when it constructed many of the monuments at Mamallapuram (p1044). Although all of these dynasties were engaged in continual skirmishes, their steady patronage of the arts served to consolidate and expand Dravidian civilisation.

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 Puducherry (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.

**Information**

The state tourism body is **Tamil Nadu Tourism** ([www.tamilnadutourism.org](http://www.tamilnadutourism.org)) with tourist offices of varying usefulness in most cities and large towns around the state. It also runs a fairly average chain of hotels.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Accommodation over Rs 200 in Tamil Nadu (but not Puducherry) is subject to a government 'luxury' tax – 5% on rooms between Rs 200

and 500, 10% on rooms between Rs 501 and 1000 and 12.5% on rooms over Rs 1000. There's often an additional 'service tax' at upmarket hotels. Prices throughout this chapter do not include tax, unless stated otherwise. There are few surprises with hotels in Tamil Nadu – the exceptions are Puducherry, which has some lovely heritage hotels, and Ooty and Kodaikanal which have everything from forest lodges to Raj-era mansions.

**PERMITS**

As well as for the areas listed below, permits are required for trekking in some areas of the Nilgiri Hills around Mudumalai National Park (see p1104). Reputable guides should have the required permits for tourist trekking; researchers and academics need to apply separately.

**Conservator of Forests** (☎ 24321139; 8th fl, Panangal Bldg, Saidapet, Chennai) The Conservator of Forests issues permits for all areas other than the Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary, but will only do so for researchers.

**Wildlife Warden's Office** (WWO; Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24321471; 4th fl, DMS office, 259 Anna Salai, Teynampet, Chennai) Issues permits in advance for accommodation at Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Ambling through temples is clearly a highlight of Tamil Nadu. Dealing with temple touts is not. Genuine guides exist and can greatly enhance your experience – a fair rate for a knowledgeable guide is about Rs 60 per hour – but you'll need to search them out. Many self-appointed guides demand big bucks in exchange for very little, often work as a front for nearby craft or tailor shops and, although they're widespread, Kanchipuram, Trichy and Madurai seem to be their breeding grounds. As always, get recommendations from other travellers, question the knowledge of anyone offering guide services and agree on a price before you set out.

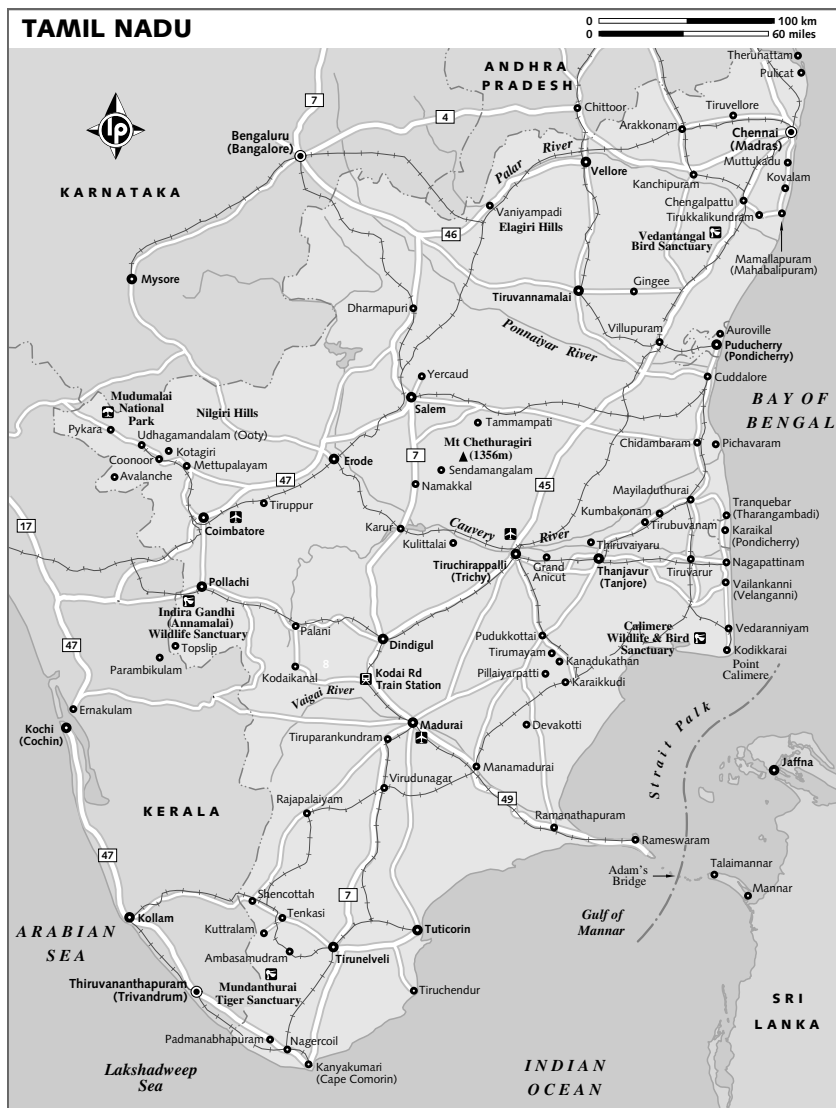
**CHENNAI (MADRAS)**

☎ 044 / pop 6.4 million

Chennai has neither the cosmopolitan, prosperous air of Mumbai (Bombay), the optimistic buzz of Bengaluru (Bangalore) or the historical drama of Delhi. It's muggy, polluted, hot as hell and difficult to get around. Traditional tourist attractions are few. Even the movie stars are, as one Chennaiker put it, 'not that hot'.

But the locals are a little friendlier than average here, the streets a little wider and, in spite of its booming IT, business-outsourcing and auto industries, the pace much slower than in most Indian cities half its size. Chennai is so modest you wouldn't even know it's an economic powerhouse, much less a queen of showbiz: India's fourth-largest city is also its most humble.

Chennai (formerly Madras) prefers to quietly hold onto tradition, thank you very much. Even its tendency to spread out – the city sprawls over 70 sq km with no real centre – seems like an attachment to the small coastal villages from which it descends. And it remains deeply conservative – the lungis (a type of sarong) is very much in fashion, alcohol



## FESTIVALS IN TAMIL NADU

Many of Tamil Nadu's most colourful festivals revolve around temples – there's something going on somewhere in the state all year round.

**International Yoga Festival** (4-7 Jan; Puducherry (Pondicherry), p1057) 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.

**Pongal** (mid-Jan; statewide) 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, which are honoured for their contribution to the harvest.

**Music festival** (Jan; Thiruvaiyaru, p1073) Held near Thanjavur, this music festival is held in honour of the saint and composer Thyagaraja.

**Teppam Float Festival** (Jan/Feb; Madurai, p1080) A popular event held on the full moon of the Tamil month of Thai, when statues of deities are floated on the huge Mariamman Teppakkulam Tank.

**Natyanjali Dance Festival** (Feb/Mar; Chidambaram, p1065) The five-day festival attracts performers from all over the country to the Nataraja Temple to celebrate Nataraja (Shiva) – the Lord of Dance.

**Arubathimooar Festival** (Mar/Apr; Chennai, p1026) A colourful one-day festival when bronze statues of the 63 saints of Shiva are paraded through the streets of Mylapore.

**Chithrai Festival** (Apr/May; Madurai, p1080) The main event on Madurai's busy festival calendar is this 14-day event that celebrates the marriage of Meenakshi to Sundareshwara (Shiva). The deities are wheeled around the Sri Meenakshi Temple in massive chariots that form part of long, colourful processions.

**Summer festivals** (May-Jun; Ooty, p1098 & Kodaikanal, p1089) Tamil Nadu's hill stations both hold similar festivals which feature boat races on the lake, horse racing (in Ooty), flower shows and music.

**Bastille Day** (14 Jul; Puducherry, p1057) Street parades and a bit of French pomp and ceremony are all part of the fun at this celebration.

**Avanimoolam** (Aug/Sep; Madurai, p1080) Marks the coronation of Sundareshwar, when temple chariots are exuberantly hauled around the city.

**Karthikai Deepam Festival** (Nov/Dec; statewide) Held during full moon, Tamil Nadu's 'festival of lights' is celebrated throughout the state, with earthenware lamps and firecrackers, but the best place to see it is Tiruvannamalai (see the boxed text, p1056), where the legend began.

**Vaikunta Ekadasi** (Paradise Festival; mid-Dec; Trichy (Tiruchirappalli), p1073) This 21-day festival brings the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple to life when the celebrated Vaishnavite text, Tiruvaimozhi, is recited before an image of Vishnu.

**Festival of Carnatic Music & Dance** (mid-Dec–mid-Jan; Chennai, p1026) One of the largest of its type in the world, this festival is a celebration of Tamil music and dance.

**Mamallapuram Dance Festival** (Dec-Jan; Mamallapuram, p1044) 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, Kathakali (Kerala drama), puppet shows and classical music. Performances are held only from Friday to Sunday.

is frowned upon and religious devotion is going strong.

With only a handful of tourist sights, Chennai doesn't demand too much of your time. But poke around the markets of George Town or Theagaraya Nagar, take a stroll along Marina Beach at sunset, and get a little taste of village life in the city.

## HISTORY

The Chennai area has always attracted seafarers, spice traders and cloth merchants. More than 2000 years ago, its residents engaged with Chinese, Greek, Phoenician, Roman and

Babylonian traders. The Portuguese would later arrive in the 16th century, followed by the Dutch. The British, initially content to purchase spices and other goods from the Dutch, decided to end their monopoly in 1599, when the Dutch increased the price of pepper. In 1639, the British East India Company established a settlement in the fishing village of Madraspatnam and completed Fort St George in 1653. George Town was granted municipal charter in 1688 by James II, making it India's oldest municipality.

In the 18th century, the supremacy of the British East India Company was chal-

lenged by 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 which developed into the Carnatic Wars. In 1756 the French withdrew to Pondicherry (now Puducherry), leaving the relieved British to develop Fort St George.

In the 19th century, the city became the seat of the Madras presidency, one of the four divisions of British Imperial India. After independence, it continued to grow into what is now a significant southern gateway.

## ORIENTATION

Bordered on the east by the Bay of Bengal, Chennai is a combination of many small districts. George Town, a jumble of narrow streets, bazaars and the court buildings, is in the north, near the harbour. To the south-west are the major thoroughfare of Anna Salai (Mount Rd) and the two main train stations: Egmore, for most destinations in Tamil Nadu, and Central, for interstate trains. The area around Egmore station is a budget-hotel district, as is Triplicane, at the north end of Marina Beach.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Bookpoint** (Map p1034; ☎ 28523019; 160 Anna Salai; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 4-8pm Sun)

**Higginbothams** (Map p1034; ☎ 28513519; 814 Anna Salai; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-7.30pm Sun)

**Landmark** (☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-9pm Sun) Anna Salai (Map p1034; ☎ 28495995; Spencer Plaza, Phase II); Nungambakkam (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28221000; Apex Plaza, Nungambakkam High Rd)

## Cultural Centres

All of the following have libraries and sponsor concerts, films and events.

**Alliance Française de Madras** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28279803; www.af-madras.org; 24/40 College Rd, Nungambakkam; ☎ 9am-6.45pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat, library closed Mon morning)

**American Information Resource Center** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28112000; americanlibrary.in.library.net; Gemini Circle, Anna Salai; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Bring ID.

**British Council Library** (Map p1034; ☎ 42050600; www.britishcouncilonline.org; 737 Anna Salai; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Sat) Monthly membership is Rs 100.

**Goethe-Institut** (Max Mueller Bhavan; Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28331314; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, library 11am-6pm Tue-Sat)

## Internet Access

The Central Station also has a 24-hour internet café.

**Emerald Internet** (Map p1034; ☎ 52141648; 35 Triplicane High Rd; per hr Rs 15; ☎ 9am-10.30pm)

**Internet Zone** (Map p1034; ☎ 42145885; 1 Kennet Lane, Egmore; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**iWay** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 6551755; 59 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 24hr)

**S Gee** (Map p1034; ☎ 42310391; 20 Vallabha Agraharam St; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 24hr) 'Happy hour' (per hour Rs 10) is 2pm to 6pm.

## Left Luggage

Egmore and Central Stations have left-luggage counters, as do the international and domestic airports (Rs 10 per 24 hours).

## Medical Services

**Apollo Hospital** (Map p1034; ☎ 28293333, emergency 1066, pharmacy line 42068474; 21 Grems Lane) Some of its 24-hour pharmacies deliver.

## TOP FIVE TEMPLES

Tamil Nadu is nirvana for anyone wanting to explore South Indian temple culture and architecture. Many 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. Others stand out for the stunning architecture, soaring *gopurams* (gateway towers) and intricately carved, pillared *mandapas* (pavilions in front of a 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, Madurai (p1082)
- Arunachaleswar Temple, Tiruvannamalai (p1056)
- Brihadishwara Temple, Thanjavur (p1071)
- Rock Fort Temple, Trichy (Tiruchirappalli; p1074)
- Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram (p1065)

## CHENNAI (MADRAS)

## INFORMATION

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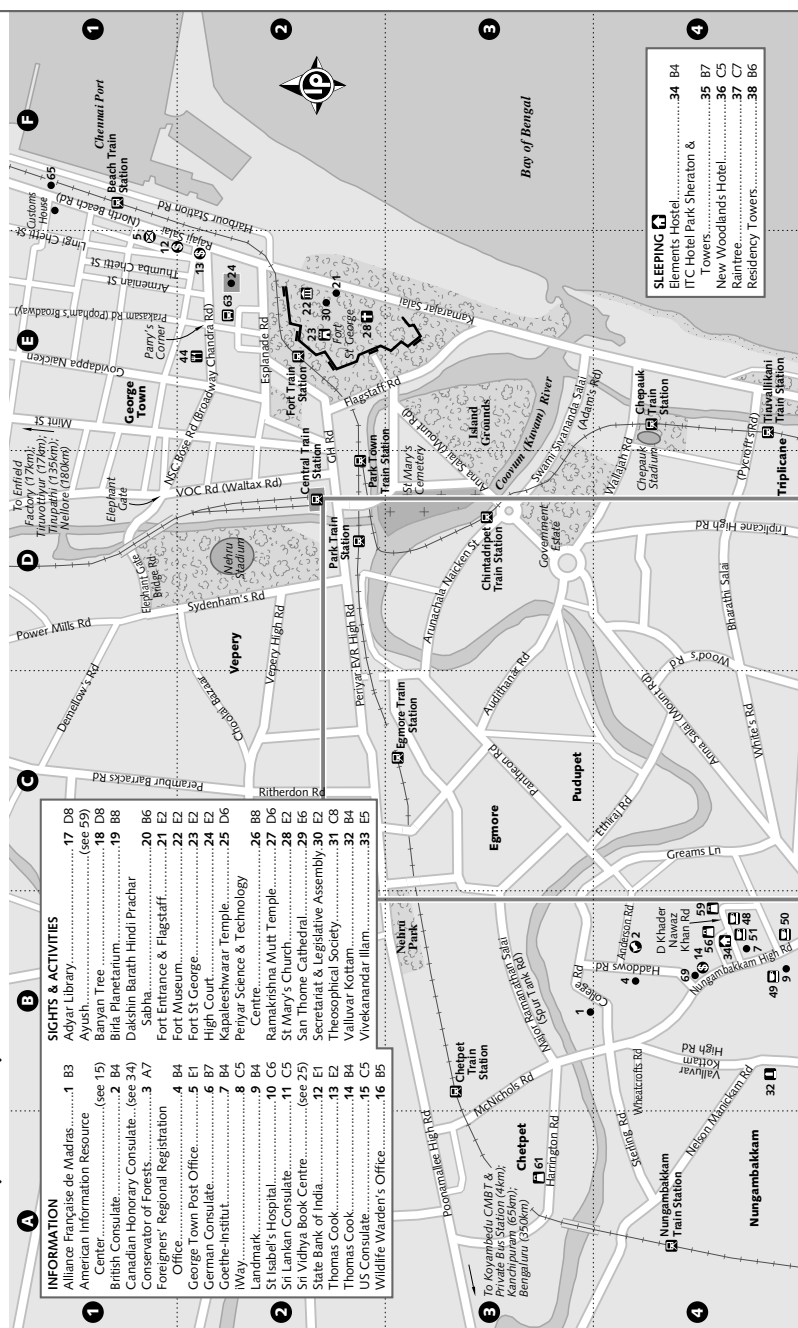
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**St Isabel's Hospital** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24991081; 18 Oliver Rd, Mylapore)

## Money

**State Bank of India** (Map pp1030-1; Rajaji Salai, George Town; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

**Thomas Cook** Anna Salai (Map p1034; ☎ 28492424; Spencer Plaza, Phase I; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm); Egmore (Map p1034; ☎ 28553276; 45 Montieth Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat); George Town (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 25342374; 20 Rajaji Salai; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat); Nungambakkam (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28274941; 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

**Post office** Anna Salai (Map p1034; ☎ 8am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun, poste restante 10am-6pm Mon-Sat); Egmore (Map p1034; Kennet Lane; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat); George Town (Map pp1030-1; Rajaji Salai; ☎ 8am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun)

## Tourist Information

The free **CityInfo** ([www.explocity.com](http://www.explocity.com)), available at the tourist office and at some hotels, has information on restaurants, nightlife and what's on. Also check out **Chennai Best** ([www.chennaiibest.com](http://www.chennaiibest.com)) and **Chennai Online** ([\[naionline.com\]\(http://naionline.com\)\). Local newspapers list upcoming events.](http://www.chen</a></p>
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**Indian Tourism Development Corporation** (ITDC; Map p1034; ☎ 28281250; [www.attindiaturism.com](http://www.attindiaturism.com); Cherian Cres; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Hotel and tour bookings only.

**Indiatourism** (Map p1034; ☎ 28460285; [indoutour@vsnl.com](mailto:indoutour@vsnl.com); 154 Anna Salai; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Great for maps and information. Also has counters at the Tourism Complex and both airports.

**Tamil Nadu Tourism Complex** (TTDC; Map p1034; ☎ 25367850; [www.tamilnadutourism.org](http://www.tamilnadutourism.org); 2 Wallajah Rd, Triplicane; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) State tourist offices from all over India, including Tamil Nadu (☎ 25383333).

## Travel Agencies

**Madura Travel Service** (Map p1034; ☎ 28192970; [www.maduratravel.com](http://www.maduratravel.com); Kennet Lane, Egmore; ☎ 24hr)

**SP Travels & Tours** (Map p1034; ☎ 28604001; [spravels1@eth.net](mailto:spravels1@eth.net); 90 Anna Salai; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat)

## Visa Extensions

**Foreigners' Regional Registration Office** (Map pp1030-1; Shastri Bhavan, Haddows Rd, Nungambakkam; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Travellers have managed to procure visa extensions here after a lot of waiting and persuasion. If you're lucky, the (very complex) applications take 10 days to process.

### STREET NAME CHANGES

It's not only the city that's been renamed. Many streets had official name changes, only some of which stuck. As if that weren't enough, building numbers changed, too. Most addresses have an 'old' and 'new' number, generally written as new/old.

Old name	New name
Adam's Rd	Swami Sivananda Salai
Broadway	NSC Chandra Bose Rd
C-in-C Rd	Ethiraj Rd
Harris Rd	Audithanar Rd
Lloyd's Rd	Avvai Shanmughan Salai
Marshalls Rd	Rukmani Lakshmi Pathy Rd
Mount Rd	Anna Salai
Mowbray's Rd	TTK Rd
North Beach Rd	Rajaji Salai
Nungambakkam High Rd	Mahatma Gandhi Salai
Poonamallee High Rd	Periyar High Rd
Popham's Broadway	Prakasam Rd
Pycroft's Rd	Bharathi Salai
Triplicane High Rd	Quaid-Milleth High Rd
South Beach Rd	Kamarajar Salai
Waltax Rd	VOC Rd



## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Getting around is likely to be your biggest problem in Chennai. Autorickshaw drivers are tough to bargain with (meters aren't used) and may dispute an agreed-upon fare on arrival. Avoid giving money up front, even if you've hired the auto for the day.

Drivers may offer Rs 50 one-hour 'sightseeing' rides to anywhere in the city, but usually this means you'll be ferried to craft emporiums: don't fall for it.

If you have a serious problem with a driver, mentioning a call to the **traffic police** (☎ 103) can defuse the conflict. See p1043 for details on other modes of transport.

## SIGHTS

### Egmore & Central Chennai

#### GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

Housed across several British-built buildings known as the Pantheon Complex, this excellent **museum** (Map p1034; ☎ 28193238; www.chennaiuseum.org; 486 Pantheon Rd; Indian/foreigner/student Rs 15/250/75, camera/video Rs 200/500; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Sat-Thu) is Chennai's best.

The main building has a fine **archaeological section** representing all the major South Indian periods including Chola, Vijayanagar, Hoysala and Chalukya in sculpture and temple art. Further along is a fascinating **natural history and zoology** section with a motley collection of skeletons (including a blue whale and Indian elephant) and stuffed birds and animals from around the world. Look out for the desiccated cat in a glass case!

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, and the numerous representations of Natesa or Nataraja, the four-armed dancing Shiva stomping on a demon.

The same ticket gets you into the **National Art Gallery**, in Building 5 to the left of the main entrance. It features an excellent collection of 10th- to 18th-century Mughal, Rajasthani and Deccan artworks. On either side of the gallery are the **children's museum** and an interesting **modern art gallery**.

#### VIVEKANANDAR ILLAM

The **Vivekananda House** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28446188; Kamarajar Salai, Triplicane; adult/child Rs 2/1; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Thu-Tue) is fascinating not only for the

displays on the famous 'wandering monk', but also for the building in which it's housed. The semicircular seafront structure was formerly known as the Ice House and was once used to store massive ice blocks transported by ship from North America. Swami Vivekananda stayed here in 1897 on his return from the USA and preached his ascetic philosophy to adoring crowds. The museum now 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.

#### VALLUVAR KOTTAM

This **memorial** (Map pp1030-1; Valluvar Kottam High Rd, Kodambakkam; ☎ 9am-7.30pm) honours the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar and his classic work, the *Thirukural*. Thiruvalluvar, a weaver by trade, lived around the 1st century BC in present-day Chennai, and apparently wrote the poem when asked to record his eminent verbal teachings. The *Thirukural* suggests ways to contemplate life's enigmas and strategies for right understanding and conduct. Today, the poem is a moral code for millions, and Thiruvalluvar is considered a saint. The three-level memorial replicates ancient Tamil architecture and contains inscriptions of the *Thirukural*'s 1330 couplets.

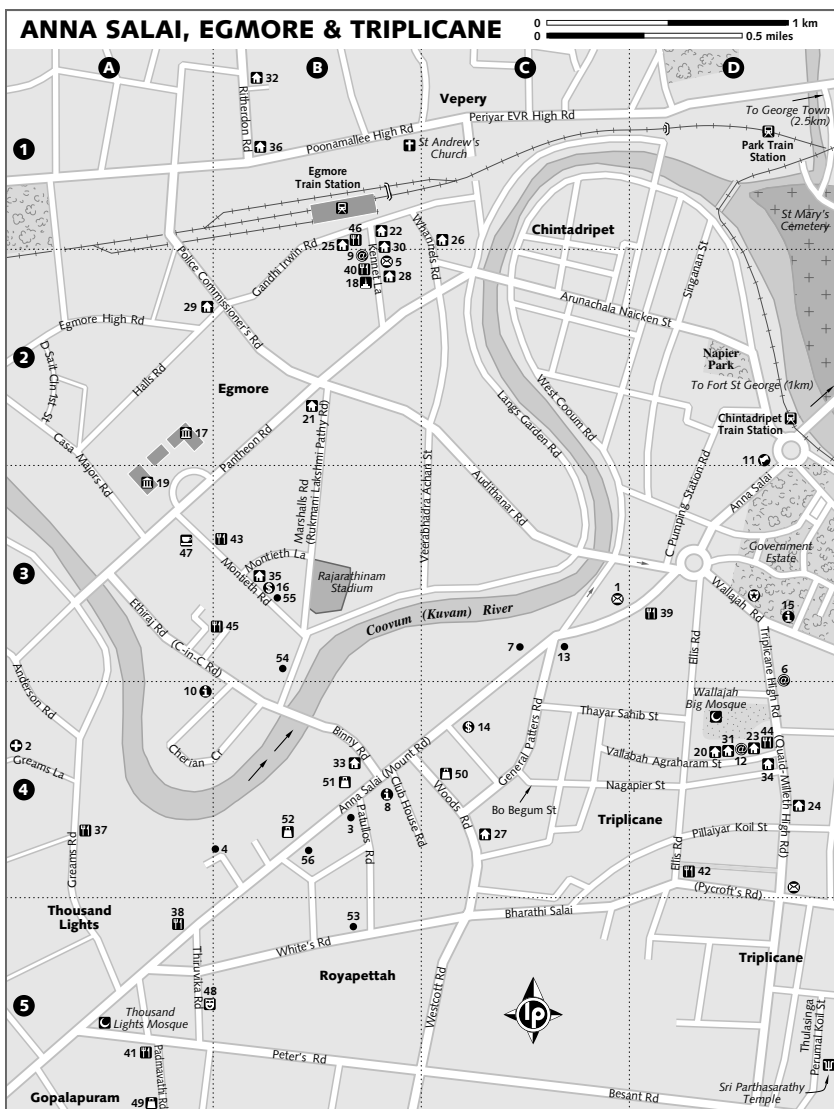
### South Chennai

The following sights appear on the Chennai (Madras) map, pp1030-1.

Chennai's most active temple, the ancient Shiva **Kapaleeshwarar Temple** (Kutchery Rd, Mylapore; ☎ 4am-noon & 4-8pm) is constructed in the Dravidian style and displays the architectural elements – rainbow-colour *gopuram*, *mandapas* (pavilions in front of a temple) and a huge tank – found in the famous temple cities of Tamil Nadu.

The tranquil, leafy grounds of the **Ramakrishna Mutt Temple** (RK Mutt Rd; ☎ 4.30-11.45am & 3-9pm, puja 8am) are a world away from the chaos outside. Orange-clad monks glide around and there's a reverential feel here. The temple itself is a handsome shrine open to followers of any religion for meditation.

Built in 1504, then rebuilt in neogothic style in 1893, **San Thome Cathedral** (☎ 24985455) is a soaring Roman Catholic church between Kapaleeshwarar Temple and Marina Beach. In the basement is a chapel housing the tomb of St Thomas the Apostle (Doubting Thomas).



During an early morning or evening stroll along the 13km sandy stretch of **Marina Beach** you'll pass cricket matches, kids flying kites, fortune tellers, fish markets and families enjoying the sea breeze. Don't swim here – strong rips make it dangerous. About 2km further south in Besant Nagar, **Elliot's Beach** is a more affluent place, popular with young couples.

Between the Adyar River and the coast, the 100 hectares of the **Theosophical Society** (Adyar Bridge Rd; ☎ 8-10am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-10am Sat) provide a peaceful retreat from the city. The grounds contain a church, mosque, Buddhist shrine and Hindu temple, as well as a huge variety of native and introduced trees, including a 400-year-old **banyan tree**. The **Adyar**

INFORMATION					
Anna Salai Post Office.....	1 C3	Hotel Comfort.....	23 D4	Spencer's Daily.....	(see 51)
Apollo Hospital .....	2 A4	Hotel Himalaya.....	24 D4	Vasanta Bhavan.....	46 B1
Bookpoint.....	3 B4	Hotel Impala Continental.....	25 B1	Vasantha Bhavan.....	(see 22)
British Council Library.....	4 B4	Hotel New Park Plaza.....	26 C1		
Egmore Post Office.....	5 B2	Hotel Orchid Inn.....	27 C4	<b>DRINKING ☑</b>	
Emerald Internet.....	6 D3	Hotel Regent.....	28 B2	Café Coffee Day.....	47 A3
Higginbothams.....	7 C3	Krishna Park.....	29 A2		
Indiatourism.....	8 B4	New Victoria Hotel.....	30 B1	<b>ENTERTAINMENT ☑</b>	
Internet Zone.....	9 B2	Paradise Guest House.....	31 D4	Sathyam Cinema.....	48 A5
ITDC.....	10 A4	Salvation Army Red Shield Guest House.....	32 B1		
Landmark.....	(see 51)	Taj Connemara.....	33 B4	<b>SHOPPING ☑</b>	
Madura Travel Service.....	(see 9)	Thaj Regency.....	34 D4	Amethyst.....	49 A5
Maldives Honorary Consulate...	11 D2	Vestin Park.....	35 B3	Fabindia.....	50 C4
S Gee.....	12 D4	YWCA International Guest House.....	36 B1	Fabindia.....	(see 51)
SP Travels & Tours.....	13 C3			Spencer Plaza.....	51 B4
State Bank of India.....	14 C4			Victoria Technical Institute.....	52 B4
Tamil Nadu Tourist Complex.....	15 D3				
Thomas Cook.....	16 B3	<b>EATING ☑</b>		<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Thomas Cook.....	(see 51)	Amethyst.....	(see 49)	Air Deccan.....	53 B5
		Gallopini' Gooseberry.....	37 A4	Air France.....	(see 55)
		Gyan Vaishnava Punjabi Dhaba.....	38 A5	Air India.....	54 B3
		Hotel Comfort.....	(see 23)	Air Sahara.....	(see 53)
		Hotel Saravana Bhavan.....	39 D3	American Airlines.....	(see 55)
		Hotel Saravana Bhavan.....	40 B2	Cathay Pacific.....	(see 53)
		Hotel Saravana Bhavan.....	41 A5	Gulf Air.....	(see 55)
		Jam Bazaar.....	42 D4	Indian Airlines.....	(see 54)
		Kitchen K.....	43 B3	Jet Airways.....	55 B3
		Maharaja Restaurant.....	44 D4	KLM.....	(see 54)
		Ponnusamy Hotel.....	45 B3	Lufthansa.....	56 B4
				Private Bus Stand.....	(see 40)

**Library** (☎ 9am-5pm) here has a huge collection of books on religion and philosophy. If you're interested in the Theosophical Society's philosophy, call into the public relations office and chat with the director.

To the west, near Guindy, is the **Periyar Science & Technology Centre** (☎ 24416751; admission Rs 15; ☎ 10am-5.30pm). You can learn your weight on Pluto and other tidbits from its kitschy science exhibits. The **Birla Planetarium** (admission Rs 20; ☎ shows 10.45am, 1.15pm & 3.45pm) is next door.

## George Town

The following sights appear on the Chennai (Madras) map, pp1030-1.

### FORT ST GEORGE

Built around 1653 by the British East India Company, the **fort** (☎ 10am-5pm) has undergone many alterations over the years. Inside the vast perimeter walls is now a precinct housing the **Secretariat & Legislative Assembly**, so there's plenty of daily activity here but not much of historical interest. The 46m-high **flagstaff** at the front is a mast salvaged from a 17th-century shipwreck. The main entrance to the fort is on Kamarajar Salai (near the flagstaff).

The **Fort Museum** (☎ 25670389; Indian/foreigner Rs 2/100, video Rs 25; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Sat-Thu), in the old Exchange Building near the fort entrance,

has military memorabilia from the British and French East India Companies, as well as the Raj and Muslim administrations. There's a scale model of the fort in Gallery 2 and some fine prints of early colonial Madras upstairs.

**St Mary's Church**, completed in 1680, was the first English church in Madras and India's oldest surviving British church.

### HIGH COURT

This red Indo-Saracenic structure (1892) at Parry's Corner is George Town's main landmark. It's 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.

## Other Sights

### LITTLE MOUNT & ST THOMAS MOUNT

It's believed that from around AD 58, St Thomas lived in hiding at **Little Mount** (Chinnamalai; Saidapet). The cave still bears what some believe to be Thomas' handprint, left when he escaped through an opening that miraculously appeared. Three kilometres on, **St Thomas Mount** (Parangi Malai) is thought to be the site of Thomas' martyrdom in AD 72. Little Mount and St Thomas Mount are about 1km from the Saidapet and St Thomas Mount Mass Rapid Transport System (MRTS) stations, respectively.

## WORKERS IN THE SHADOWS

They leave their slum dwellings early to begin work in the city by 6am. They move swiftly and silently along the city streets, keeping to the shadows and mostly working in pairs. The waste-pickers – mostly women, sometimes children – spend up to 10 hours a day rummaging through domestic and industrial waste and separating it into bags of metal, plastic, paper, cloth and other recyclables. Usually they sell their bundles to middlemen who then sell to recycling companies. For this dangerous and dirty work they earn around Rs 45 a day. With assistance from NGOs, some waste-pickers have formed cooperatives, bypassing the middlemen and boosting their earning potential.

## ENFIELD FACTORY

Motorcycle fans will enjoy visiting the famous **Enfield factory** (☎ 42230245; www.royalensfield.com; Tiruvottiyur), 17km north of Chennai, where bikes have been made since 1955. Half-hour tours run on Saturday at 9.30am and cost Rs 500.

## ACTIVITIES

Go for a 45-minute *abhyangam* (oil treatment; Rs 500) or an extended Ayurvedic programme at **Ayush** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 65195195; www.leverayush.com; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd, Nungambakkam; ☎ 7am-7pm).

## COURSES Language

**Dakshin Barath Hindi Prachar Sabha** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24341824; Thanikachalam Rd, Theagaraya Nagar) Hindi courses in all levels.

**International Institute of Tamil Studies** (☎ 22540992; www.ulakaththamizh.org; Central Polytechnic Campus, Adyar) Three-month courses in Tamil. Can recommend teachers for shorter-term study.

## Meditation

**Dhamma Setu** (Vipassana Meditation Centre; ☎ 24780953; info@setu.dhamma.org; www.dhamma.org; Pazhan Thandalam Rd, Thirumudivakkam) Intensive 10-day courses in the SN Goenka tradition of *vipassana* meditation. See p100 for more details.

**Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka** (Map p1034; ☎ 28192458; 12 Kennet Lane, Egmore) Dhamma talks, meditation and special *pujas* (offerings or prayers) on full-moon and other days.

**Vivekanandar Illam** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28446188; Kamarajar Salai, Triplicane) Free one-hour classes on Wednesday nights.

## Yoga

**Ayush** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 65195195; www.leverayush.com; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd, Nungambakkam; ☎ 6-11am & 5-8pm) Courses for 21 days (Rs 1200) or one hour (Rs 150).

**Vivekanandar Illam** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28446188; Kamarajar Salai, Triplicane) Eight-week sessions are Rs 500. Call ahead to take a single class.

## TOURS

TTDC (p1032) conducts half-day city tours (Rs 120) and day trips to Mamallapuram (Rs 330), Puducherry (Rs 400) and Tirupathi (Rs 640). Book at ITDC (p1032) or TTDC.

## SLEEPING

Egmore, on and around Kennet Lane, is good for budget accommodation and all the touts and chaos that go with it. It's also convenient for the train stations. Many prefer the (slightly) less chaotic Triplicane – budget and midrange places huddle around Triplicane High Rd. The top hotels are scattered around the quieter areas south and west of the centre. Places fill up in peak season (December to February), so call ahead.

## Budget

### EGMORE

**Salvation Army Red Shield Guest House** (Map p1034; ☎ 25321821; 15 Ritherdon Rd; dm/s/d Rs 80/300/350; ♿) This popular cheapie in a quiet spot north of Egmore Station has helpful staff and ageing but clean bathrooms (with bucket hot water for dorm-dwellers). Entrance is on BKN Ave.

**Hotel Regent** (Map p1034; ☎ 28191801; 11 Kennet Lane; s/d from Rs 200/315) In the centre of Kennet Lane's chaos, but set back from the road, the Regent is almost tranquil. Very clean rooms surround a shady, freshly swept courtyard.

**Hotel Impala Continental** (Map p1034; ☎ 28191423; 12 Gandhi Irwin Rd; s/d incl tax from Rs 220/372) Impala is one of Egmore's better-value budget places, with clean, spacious double rooms. You'll find it full if you don't book ahead.

**Krishna Park** (Map p1034; ☎ 28190026; 61 Halls Rd; s/d from Rs 325/550; ♿) Near the station but away from its bustle, it has special touches such as stainless-steel buckets and towel racks in the bathroom, smiling staff, and glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling of Room 303.

**TRIPLICANE**

**Broadlands Lodge** (Map p1034; ☎ 28545573; broadlandshotel@yahoo.com; 18 Vallabha Agraharam St; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 200/300, with private bathroom from Rs 300/350) A longtime travellers' hang-out, Broadlands Lodge is falling apart and not very clean, but the old colonial-style place ranks number one for personality. Rooms are set around a leafy central courtyard, and the upper-storey rooms No 43 and 44 are spectacular. The shared bathrooms are dank and hot water is by bucket.

**Paradise Guest House** (Map p1034; ☎ 28594252; paradisegh@hotmail.com; 17 Vallabha Agraharam St; s/d/tr from Rs 250/300/400; ☺) With gleaming tiles, a breezy (but unfinished) rooftop and friendly staff, we thought this was the best value in Triplicane – even though hot water is by the bucket. Some rooms don't have much view so ask to see a few; those on the upper floors are newer.

**Hotel Himalaya** (Map p1034; ☎ 28547522; 54 Triplicane High Rd; s/d/tr Rs 350/400/550; ☺) This is a great budget/midrange choice with plain but comfortable rooms, a 24-hour internet café and travel desk. Some effort has been made at aesthetics: cheesy landscape photos pepper the walls, and a blue sky is painted on the elevator interior.

Other recommendations:

**Thaj Regency** (Map p1034; ☎ 28529524; 300 Triplicane High Rd; s/d from Rs 200/265; ☺)

**Hotel Comfort** (Map p1034; ☎ 28587661; www.hotelcomfort.com; 22 Vallabha Agraharam; s/d from Rs 400/500; ☺)

**Midrange  
EGMORE**

**Hotel Chandra Park** (Map p1034; ☎ 28191177; www.hotelchandrapark.com; 9 Gandhi Irwin Rd; s/d with AC incl breakfast from Rs 550/750; ☺) The new Chandra Park is priced mysteriously low. The lobby is classy, with lotus flowers floating in a pool and a mosaic of a Bharata Natyam dancer. Standard rooms are small but have clean towels and tight white sheets. Wisely set back from the road.

**YWCA International Guest House** (Map p1034; ☎ 25324234; ywcaigh@indiainfo.com; Poonamallee High Rd; s/d/tr from Rs 650/800/1100; ☺) The YWCAIGH has a monastic feel to it, with off-the-charts cleanliness, a painting of Jesus in the hallway, and no TVs in rooms but, rather, a cosy hallway TV lounge. Geese amble around the leafy compound, which is, unbelievably, just near the train station.

**Hotel Ashoka** (Map p1034; ☎ 28553377; www.ballargroupshotels.com; 47 Pantheon Rd; s/d incl breakfast from Rs 800/900; ☺) If 1950s Miami and a spaceship had a baby, it would be the Hotel Ashoka. Rooms are old-school, with a thousand layers of white paint around the windows and dated room-number plaques, while cottages (single/double Rs 1700/2250) have a lounge ambience: lush red carpeting, fridges and coconlike tubs. The compound includes an 'ice cream park' with a counter built around a big tree. Chennai's funkiest.

Other recommendations:

**New Victoria Hotel** (Map p1034; ☎ 28193638; www.newvictoriahotel.com; 3 Kennet Lane; s/d incl breakfast from Rs 975/1250; ☺) Good deluxe rooms.

**Hotel New Park Plaza** (Map p1034; ☎ 30777777; parkplaza@eth.net; 29 Whannels Rd; s/d incl breakfast from Rs 1500/2000; ☺) Has a rooftop bar-restaurant and just underwent a mega-renovation.

**Vestin Park** (Map p1034; ☎ 28527171; www.vestinpark.com; 39 Montieeth Rd; s/d incl breakfast from Rs 2000/2500; ☺) Fancy for the price; it's a 'business star' hotel.

**TRIPLICANE**

**Hotel Orchid Inn** (Map p1034; ☎ 28522555; 19 Woods Rd; s/d from Rs 600/700; ☺) A short walk from Anna Salai, the Orchid has slightly more style than most midrange places. Rooms have interesting details such as ceiling moulding trimmed in lavender or gold, and bathrooms have newish blue tile (and bucket hot water). The 'suite', ambitiously named 'Cloud 9' (singles/doubles Rs 1000/1250), has purple-and-coral walls and tubular furniture.

**MYLAPORE & NUNGAMBAKKAM**

**New Woodlands Hotel** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28113111; www.newwoodlands.com; 72-75 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai; s/d from Rs 550/1050; ☺) A sprawling complex with 170 rooms and a certain eccentric character, New Woodlands is a Chennai institution. The doubles have seen better days, but singles are a good deal, with balconies overlooking the compound's many trees. Rooms have wi-fi connectivity.

**Elements Hostel** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42142552; www.elementshostel.com; 26A Wallace Garden, 3rd St; dm/s/d incl breakfast from Rs 375/1000/1800; ☺) It's pricey for a hostel, but this is a 'boutique hostel' and you're paying for the amenities: spotless, homy bathrooms with 24-hour hot water, kitchen access, cellphones for rent, an internet centre and a spot in Nungambakkam's chichi shopping area. Plus, it has a swing set. It's a

little hard to find; look for the basketball net out front.

## Top End

The following hotels have central AC, multicuisine restaurant and bar, and they accept credit cards. Unless stated otherwise, check-out is noon.

**Residency Towers** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28156363; www.theresidency.com; Sir Theagaraya Nagar Rd; s/d from US\$3700/4200; 🏠 📺 🚿) At this price, it's like Residency Towers doesn't know what a good thing it has going: five-star elegance with a lot more personality – and 24-hour checkout. 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.

**Raintree** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42252525; www.raintreehotels.com; 120 St Mary's Rd, Mylapore; s/d from US\$160/170; 🏠 📺 🚿) At the eco-friendly Raintree, floors are made of bamboo (which is an annual), wastewater is treated and used for gardening, and electricity conservation holds pride of place. But then the sleek, minimalist rooms are some of the most stylish and comfortable around, and the rooftop pool (which doubles as insulation) has a gorgeous wooden terrace with views of the sea.

Also recommended:

**Taj Connemara** (Map p1034; ☎ 66000000; www.tajhotels.com; Binny Rd; s & d from US\$215-240; 🏠 📺 🚿) Built in the Raj era, it still retains some regal charm.

**ITC Hotel Park Sheraton & Towers** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24994101; www.itcwelcomgroup.com; TTK Rd, Alwarpet; s/d from US\$230/255; 🏠 📺 🚿)

## EATING

Chennai has a good range of 'meals' joints, which serve thalis (traditional South Indian 'all-you-can-eat' meals) for lunch and dinner, and tiffin (snacks) such as *idlis* (rice dumplings) and dosas (lentil-flour pancakes) the rest of the day. It's tempting – and feasible – to eat every meal at one of Chennai's 17 bustling Saravana Bhavans, which you can count on for quality vegetarian food.

The Mylapore area has many good independent restaurants, so head there if you're looking for something more refined.

## Restaurants

### EGMORE

**Vasanta Bhavan** (Map p1034; 33 Gandhi Irwin Rd; mains Rs 40-60; 🕒 5am-11pm; 🍴) Excellent 'meals' (Rs 30).

The older Vasantha Bhavan down the street at No 10 is not as good but has more charm and also sweets.

**Ponnusamy Hotel** (Map p1034; Wellington Estate, 24 Ethiraj Rd; mains Rs 40-85; 🕒 lunch & dinner) This well-known nonveg place serves curry, biryani (steamed rice with meat or vegetables) and Chettinad specialties. Unusual dishes include pigeon fry and rabbit masala.

**Kitchen K** (Map p1034; 10 Montieth Rd; mains Rs 50-95; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Earth tones, clay pots and wrought-iron chairs make for a soothing ambience at this café serving Hyderabadi and northern dishes. Cake Walk (open 10am to 10pm) next door has tiramisu, apple pie and black forest cake, among other indulgences (Rs 40).

**Hotel Saravana Bhavan** Egmore (Map p1034; 21 Kennet Lane; 🕒 6am-10.30pm); George Town (Map pp1030-1; NSC Bose Rd (Broadway Chandra Rd); Mylapore (Map pp1030-1; 101 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai; 🕒 6am-11.30pm); 🕒 7am-11pm); Thousand Lights (Map p1034; 293 Peter's Rd; 🕒 lunch & dinner); Triplicane (Map p1034; Shanthi Theatre Complex, 48 Anna Salai; 🕒 7am-11pm) Dependably delish, 'meals' at the Saravana Bhavans run around Rs 50, though the Mylapore locale has some 'special meals' for Rs 95 and up. The Thousand Lights branch is more upscale, with an Rs 160 buffet and silver cutlery.

### TRIPPLICANE

**Maharaja Restaurant** (Map p1034; 207 Triplicane High Rd; mains Rs 25-40; 🕒 6am-11pm) Maharaja is a popular veg joint for 'meals' (Rs 22) and early morning tea and *idlis*.

**Hotel Comfort** (Map p1034; 22 Vallabha Agraharam; mains Rs 30-100; 🕒 dinner) The menu is typical Indian and Chinese, but the rooftop garden is cosy and relaxed, with lots of plants around and great views. You can get a cold beer here, too.

### THOUSAND LIGHTS & GOPALAPURAM

**Gyan Vaishnava Punjabi Dhaba** (Map p1034; 260 Anna Salai; mains Rs 40-100; 🕒 lunch & dinner) When asked about his excellent pure-veg Punjabi, Jain and other northern dishes, Mr Vaishnava opened his arms and said, 'I'm giving quality... with love.' And that's the truth.

**Gallop-in' Gooseberry** (Map p1034; ☎ 23450872; 1st fl, 11 Greams Rd; dishes Rs 75-125; 🕒 11am-11pm) This American diner-style place does fab Cajun, mushroom and tikka burgers (around Rs 85), as well as pasta and sandwiches. It also delivers. The Fruit Shop next door has exotic juices and shakes (Rs 10 to 70).



**Amethyst** (Map p1034; ☎ 28353581; Padmavathi Rd; light meals Rs 85-200; ☎ 10am-9.30pm) Sitting on the patio amid the gardens of this heritage house (see also p1040) will make you feel like someone else entirely. Tea comes with cucumber-and-mint-chutney sandwiches at teatime (Rs 125; 5pm to 7pm).

## MYLAPORE

**Amaravathi** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28116416; cnr Cathedral & TTK Rds; mains Rs 50-95; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 7-11pm) Amaravathi serves hot Andhran specialities on banana leaves. Try the biryani or mango prawn masala (an Andhran interpretation of a Keralan classic; Rs 85), but we'd stay away from the mutton-bone soup.

**Coconut Lagoon** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42020428; cnr Cathedral & TTK Rds; mains Rs 55-200; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11.45pm) Excellent Keralan and Goan fare with a focus on seafood delicacies, such as *kari meen polli chathu* (fish masala steamed in banana leaf).

**Zara's** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28111462; 74 Cathedral Rd; tapas Rs 65-195; ☎ 1-3pm & 6.30-11pm) An ultra-cool tapas bar with a genuine Spanish flavour, it has everything from squid and olives to tortilla and sangria. Make reservations on weekends. See also right.

**Benjarong** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24322640; 537 TTK Rd; mains Rs 130-400; ☎ 12.15-2.45pm & 7.15-11.30pm) From the finely crafted furniture and calming ambience to the attentive service and superbly presented food, this Thai restaurant is an experience. Most mains are around Rs 200, and the three-course special lunch (Rs 158 to 230) will make you feel like royalty.

Other spots:

**Romalee** (Map pp1030-1; cnr Cathedral & TTK Rds; mains Rs 45-100; ☎ 6-11pm) Open-air Hyderabad barbecue.

**EcoCafé** (Map pp1030-1; Chamiers Rd; mains Rs 100-140; ☎ 8am-10.30pm) So-so food in an atmospheric garden, under arty lamps hanging from an almond tree.

**Don Pepe** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28110413; 73 Cathedral Rd; mains Rs 120-180; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11.30pm) Classy Mexican.

## Quick Eats

It's OK to love ghee.

**Grand Sweets** (Map pp1030-1; 24 Gandhi Nagar 2nd Main Rd, Adyar; ☎ 9am-7.30pm) Chennai's favourite sweets.

**Suriya Sweets** (Map pp1030-1; 66 1st Main Rd, RA Puram; ☎ 6.30am-10.30pm) Chennai's second-favourite sweets, with an organic veggie market.

## Self-Catering

**Nilgiri Dairy Farm** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28110049; 103 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai; ☎ 9.30am-8pm, closed Tue) A great supermarket.

**Spencer's Daily** (Map p1034; ☎ 42140784; Spencer Plaza, Phase I, Anna Salai; ☎ 9.30am-9pm)

**24-Lettered Mantra** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24618400; 11 Vishwanathan St, RA Puram; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Sat) It's out of the way, but this little shop has all-organic cooking staples and spices.

**Jam Bazaar** (Map p1034; cnr Ellis Rd & Bharathi Salai) The colourful way to get fruit, vegetables and spices.

## DRINKING Cafés

Chennai is very much in the throes of India's cappuccino addiction.

**Café Coffee Day** (coffee Rs 20-50; ☎ 10am-11pm)

Egmore (Map p1034; Alsa Mall, Montieth Rd); Nungambakkam (Map pp1030-1; Nungambakkam High Rd)

**Barista** (Map pp1030-1; Rosy Towers, Nungambakkam High Rd; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd; coffee Rs 20-50; ☎ 7.30am-11.30pm)

**Mocha** (Map pp1030-1; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd; coffee Rs 20-180; ☎ 11am-11pm) The young and beautiful go to Mocha for coffee, hookahs (Rs 150 to 325) and snacks (Rs 50 to 150) in exceedingly arty surrounds. Lovely outdoor garden.

## Bars & Nightclubs

Chennai's nightlife scene is on the move but it's no Bengaluru or Mumbai. Bars and clubs are legally supposed to close at midnight (though the clubs occasionally stay open later), and are restricted to hotels. Exceptions are the seedy, government-operated 'wine shops', where men consume cheap local rum.

Some midrange hotels have AC bars with cold beers for Rs 120. Try the rooftop bars at Hotel Comfort (p1037) or New Park Plaza (p1037) and Tropicana Bar at New Victoria Hotel (p1037).

Nightclubs charge a cover of Rs 300 to 500 on weekends (or even weekdays), and gents will require a lady chaperone to enter.

**Zara's** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28111462; 74 Cathedral Rd; cocktails Rs 225-325; ☎ 1-3pm & 6.30-11pm) Where the cool people come on weekends for tapas (see left), sangria, house-infused vodka (jalapeno, almond, cinnamon) and inventive mocktails. Dress nice, guys: no shorts or sandals allowed.

**Bike & Barrel** (Map pp1030-1; Residency Towers, Sir Theagaraya Rd; ☎ 11.30am-11.30pm) Better vibe than most bars; walls full of memorabilia, barrels for tables



and a motorcycle hanging from the ceiling. Beer is Rs 140 and pub grub is available.

**Dublin** (Map pp1030-1; ITC Park Sheraton, 132 TTK Rd; ☎ 6pm-midnight, closed Tue) An Irish pub-club with three levels of dancing. Cover charged after 10pm.

Other clubs:

**Pasha** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42144000; The Park, 601 Anna Salai; ☎ 8-11.45pm Wed-Sat) Egyptian-themed.

**Havana** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42252525; Raintree, 120 St Mary's Rd, Mylapore; ☎ 7-11.30pm Tue-Sun) Cuban-themed, with cigars and everything.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Classical Music & Dance

**Music Academy** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28115162; nr TTK Rd & Dr Radhakrishnan Salai) This is Chennai's most popular public venue for Carnatic classical music and Bharata Natyam dance. Check newspapers for events. Expect to pay Rs 250 for a good seat, although many performances are free.

**Kalakshetra Arts Village** (☎ 24521169; kshetra@vsnl.com; Dr Muthulakshmi Rd, Tiruvanmiyur; ☎ 10am-6pm) Founded in 1936, Kalakshetra is committed to reviving classical dance and music. See one of the regular performances, or a class (9am to 11am and 2pm to 4.30pm Monday to Friday). Four-month courses are held in music and dance for Rs 600 per month.

## Cinema

Chennai has more than 100 cinemas, a reflection of the vibrant film industry here. Most screen Tamil films, but **Sathyam Cinema** (Map p1034;

☎ 28512425; 8 Thiruvika Rd) often shows English-language films in addition to Tamil and Hindi blockbusters. Tickets cost Rs 55 to 110. Check local papers for show times.

## SHOPPING

Chennai's shopping landscape is changing. Traditional stores are extending services to keep up with the spread of the mall epidemic, while new, sophisticated boutiques are responding to both with panache.

Theagaraya Nagar (aka T Nagar; Map pp1030-1) has great shopping, especially at Pondy Bazaar and around Panagal Park. Nungambakkam's shady D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd (Map pp1030-1) is an exceedingly pleasant lane of shops, cafés and galleries.

Most of the finest Kanchipuram silks turn up in Chennai (and Bengaluru), so consider doing your silk shopping here.

**Victoria Technical Institute** (Map p1034; ☎ 2852 3141; 765 Anna Salai; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm Sat) Most of the revenue from the quality crafts here goes to the artisans, and some to charity.

**SIPA'S Craftlink** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28257544; 70 Kodambakkam High Rd, Nungambakkam; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) South India's first fair-trade craft shop.

**Amethyst** (Map p1034; ☎ 28351627; Padmavathi Rd, Gopalapuram; ☎ 11am-8pm) See what's the latest at this collection of shops in Sundar Mahal, a lovely heritage building. Clothes, jewellery and home décor by India's hottest designers.

**Anokhi** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24311495; 85/47 Chamiers Rd, RA Puram; ☎ 10am-8pm) Hand-block-printed

## INTO THE 'WOODS

Tamil film fans – and they're known for their fanaticism – will tell you that their movies have always been technically superior to Hindi films. Far from living in Bollywood's shadow, Kollywood – named for Kodambakkam, the neighbourhood preferred by many studios and film people – has its own tradition of filmmaking founded on high-quality production, slightly more realistic plot lines and much more realistic heroes (ie they like them chubby and moustachioed).

Kollywood style, though, is changing. Bollywood's famous 'masala' format – that crowd-pleasing mix of drama, comedy, romance and action – is rubbing off on Tamil films, and vice versa. Bollywood's been remaking Tamil blockbusters, while the big-name celebs in Mumbai (Bombay) are working in Kollywood. (The effect of watching Aishwarya Rai lip-synch to dubbed Tamil can be unsettling.)

For better or worse, it's working. Kollywood doesn't outdo Tollywood (the Telugu film industry) for output, but it comes second to Bollywood for revenue. Some say it even rivals it for distribution, with obsessed Tamil fans queuing up not only in Tamil Nadu's 1800 cinemas, but also in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, South Africa, Europe and the USA. The popularity of Telegu-dubbed Tamil movies over home-grown Tollywood films even led the Andhra Pradesh government to pass a law banning dubbing! Meanwhile, some Hindi film studios, hearing the *ch-ching* of Kollywood's success, have begun to get in on the action and produce Tamil films themselves – films which, to be sure, will be remade someday in Bollywood.

### 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 mazelike streets to see another aspect of Indian life flowing seamlessly from the past into the present.

clothes with which all the women we know are obsessed. Have iced tea afterwards at EcoCafé (p1039).

**Apparao Galleries** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28332226; 7 Wallace Garden, 3rd St, Nungambakkam; 🕒 11am-7pm Mon-Sat) Rotating exhibitions of contemporary art and photography.

**Fabindia** (Map p1034) Spencer Plaza (☎ 42158015; 🕒 11am-8pm); Woods Rd (☎ 42027015; 🕒 10am-8pm) The Woods Rd shop has home and food sections, along with fabulous clothes.

**Naturally Auroville** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28330517; D Khader Nawaz Khan Rd, Nungambakkam; 🕒 10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) *Objets* (pottery, bedspreads) and

fine foods (organic coffees and cheeses) from Auroville.

**Varadarams Silks** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28363867; 88 Harrington Rd, Chetpet; 🕒 10am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) A good selection of low-priced Kanchipuram silk in a relaxed atmosphere.

**Nalli Silks** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24344115; 9 Nageswaran Rd, Theagaraya Nagar; 🕒 9.30am-9.30pm) The granddaddy of silk shops.

The area around Kapaleeshwarar Temple has fun shopping; try **Sri Vidhya Book Centre** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24611345; Sannathi St; 🕒 9am-9pm), for well-chosen religious and cultural books, and **Shanthi Tailors** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24643783; Sannathi St; 🕒 9.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) if you're a Bharata Natyam dancer – or want to look like one.

The best commercial shopping malls include **Spencer Plaza** (Map p1034; Anna Salai), and **Chennai Citicentre** (Map pp1030-1; Dr Radhakrishnan Salai).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

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

### DOMESTIC AIRLINES

Air Deccan, along with online budget airlines GoAir, Indigo, Paramount and spicejet,

### DOMESTIC FLIGHTS FROM CHENNAI (MADRAS)

Destination	Airline	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	IC	75	45min	2 daily
	9W	72	1	6 daily
Delhi	IC	211	2½	5 daily
	9W	177	2½	11 daily
Goa	IC	121	3	1 weekly
Hyderabad	IC	103	1	3 daily
	9W	97	1	3 daily
Kochi	IC	106	1	8 weekly
Kolkata	IC	184	2	2 daily
	9W	167	2	5 daily
Mumbai	IC	133	2	11 daily
	9W	112	2	12 daily
Port Blair	IC	175	2	1 daily
	9W	147	2	3 daily
Trivandram	IC	103	1½	2 daily
	9W	112	1½	1 daily

Note: Fares are one-way only. Airline codes: IC – Indian Airlines; 9W – Jet Airways.

tend to have the cheapest domestic fares. Indian Airlines tends to have the highest, with Jet, Sahara and Kingfisher following close behind.

Domestic airlines with offices in Chennai:

**Air Deccan** (Map p1034; ☎ 42033209, airport 22560505; www.airdeccan.com; Desabhandu Plaza, White's Rd, Royapettah; 🕒 8am-8pm)

**Air Sahara** (Map p1034; ☎ 22560909, 42110202; Desabhandu Plaza, White's Rd, Royapettah)

**Indian Airlines** (Map p1034; ☎ 23453366, airport 22561971; www.indian-airlines.com; 19 Marshalls Rd, Egmore)

**Jet Airways** (Map p1034; ☎ domestic 39872222, international 1800225522; www.jetairways.com; 41/43 Montieth Rd, Egmore; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) Flies internationally, as well.

### INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES

**Air Canada** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 55713413; 101 HD Raja St, Eldhams Rd, Teynampet)

**Air France** (Map p1034; ☎ 28554916; Thapar House, 43-44 Montieth Rd, Egmore)

**Air India** (Map p1034; ☎ 28578146; Marshalls Rd, Egmore)

**American Airlines** (Map p1034; ☎ 18001807300; Thapar House, 43-44 Montieth Rd, Egmore)

**Cathay Pacific Airways** (Map p1034; ☎ 42140941; Desabhandu Plaza, White's Rd, Royapettah)

**Delta** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28226156; Maalavika Centre, 144-145 Kodambakkam High Rd)

**Gulf Air** (Map p1034; ☎ 28554417; Thapar House, 43-44 Montieth Rd, Egmore)

**InterGlobe Air Transport** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 2822 6149; Maalavika Centre, 144-145 Kodambakkam High Rd) For Air New Zealand, South African, United and Virgin Atlantic.

**KLM** (Map p1034; ☎ 28524427; Marshalls Rd, Egmore)

**Lufthansa** (Map p1034; ☎ 30213500, airport 22569393; 167 Anna Salai) No walk-ins.

**Malaysia Airlines** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42191919; 90 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai)

**Singapore Airlines** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 28473982; Westminster, 108 Dr Radhakrishnan Salai)

**Sri Lankan Airlines** (Translanka Air Travels; Map pp1030-1; ☎ 43921100; 4 Kodambakkam High Rd, Nungambakkam)

**Thai Airways International** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 42173311; 31 Haddows Rd)

### Boat

Passenger ships sail from the George Town harbour to Port Blair in the Andaman Islands (see p1111) every 10 days. The **Director of Shipping Services** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 25226873; fax 25220841; Shipping Corporation Bldg, Rajaji Salai; 🕒 10am-3pm Mon-Fri)

sells tickets (Rs 1522 to 5892) for the 60-hour trip. You'll need two photos and three photocopies each of your passport and visa.

### Bus

Most Tamil Nadu (SETC) and other government buses operate from the massive **Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus** (CMBT; ☎ 23455858, 24794705; Jawaharlal Nehru Salai, Koyambedu), better known as Koyambedu CMBT, 7km west of town.

Buses 15 or 15B from Parry's Corner or Central Station, and 27B from Anna Salai or Egmore station, all head there (Rs 4, 40 minutes). An autorickshaw charges around Rs 120 for the same ride.

Frequent SETC, Karnataka (KSRTC) and Andhra Pradesh (APRTC) buses cover the following destinations, usually in the morning and late afternoon:

Destination	Fare* (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Bengaluru	175	9
Chidambaram	82	7
Hyderabad	372	12
Kodaikanal	208	14
Madurai	180	10
Mamallapuram	40	2
Mysore	209	11
Ooty	221	14
Puducherry	59	4
Thanjavur	135	9
Tirupathi	63	4
Trichy	150	8

\* Fares are for ordinary buses.

Several companies operate Volvo AC buses to the same destinations from the less overwhelming private-bus station next door; try **KPN** (☎ 24797998) or **Rathi Meena** (☎ 24791494). Private operators also depart from opposite Egmore train station. These superdeluxe 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 Station (Map pp1030-1), while trains heading south depart from Egmore (Map p1034). The **Train Reservation Complex** (☎ general 131, reservations 1361; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) is on the west side of Central Station; the Foreign Assistance Tourist Cell is on the 1st floor. Egmore's **booking office** (☎ 28194579) keeps the same hours.

**MAJOR TRAINS FROM CHENNAI (MADRAS)**

Destination	Train No & name	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departure
Bengaluru	2007 <i>Shatabdi Exp*</i>	510/995	5	6am CC
	2609 <i>Bangalore Exp</i>	117/392	5	1.15pm CC
Delhi	2433 <i>Rajdhani Exp</i>	2005/2710	28	6.10am CC
	2621 <i>Tamil Nadu Exp</i>	497/1400/2016	33	10pm CC
Hyderabad	2759 <i>Charminar Exp</i>	317/837/1178	14½	6.10pm CC
	2753 <i>Hyderabad Exp</i>	301/792/1113	13	4.45pm CC
Kochi	6041 <i>Alleppey Exp</i>	243/741/1052	11½	9.15pm CC
Kolkata	2842 <i>Coromandel Exp</i>	449/1234/1764	27½	9am CC
	6004 <i>Howrah Mail</i>	449/1234/1764	30½	10pm CC
Madurai	6127 <i>MS Gurusvayur Exp</i>	215/574/814	8	7.25am CE
	2635 <i>Vaigai Exp</i>	142/479	8	12.25pm CE
Mumbai	6012 <i>Mumbai Exp</i>	389/1065/1521	26	11.45am CC
Mysore	2007 <i>Shatabdi Exp**</i>	655/1265	7	6am CC
	6222 <i>Kaveri Exp</i>	215/574/814	10½	9.45pm CC
Tirupathi	6053 <i>Tirupathi Exp</i>	63/209	3	1.50pm CC
Trichy	2605 <i>Pallavan Exp</i>	111/372	5½	3.30pm CE
Trivandrum	2695 <i>Trivandrum Exp</i>	342/907/1279	15½	4.15pm CC

CC – Chennai Central, CE – Chennai Egmore

\*Daily except Tuesday

\*\*Daily except Wednesday

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

The table, above, lists some popular Chennai routes. For Goa there's one direct train a week: Friday's *Chennai–Vasco Express*.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The cheapest way to reach the airport is by MRTS train to Tirusulam station, 500m across the road from the terminals.

An autorickshaw should cost you about Rs 200/300 for a day/night trip.

Both terminals have prepaid taxi kiosks, where tickets are Rs 240 (Egmore) or Rs 260 (to Anna Salai or Triplicane).

## Autorickshaw

Fares are relatively high: locals pay Rs 20 for a short trip down the road. From Egmore to George Town, Triplicane or Anna Salai should cost no more than Rs 40, to Nungambakkam, Rs 50. Prices are at least 25% higher after 10pm. There's a prepaid booth outside Central Station.

See p1033 for more on details Chennai's autorickshaws.

## Bus

Chennai's bus system is worth getting to know. The main city bus stand is at Parry's Corner (Map pp1030–1), and fares are between Rs 4 and 10. Some useful routes follow.

Bus No	Route
1	Parry's-Central-Triplicane
5D	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
19S	Parry's-Central-Adyar
27B	Egmore-Chetpet-Koyambedu CMBT
31	Parry's-Central-Vivekananda House
32	Central-Triplicane-Vivekananda House
51M	T Nagar-St Thomas Mount

## 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 Rs 450 per half-day (five hours) within the city, and Rs 5 per kilometre, with a daily 250km minimum, beyond city limits. Note that the clock starts ticking when the driver leaves the office.

We like **Shankaran** (☎ 24713874; lmt\_shankaran@yahoo.co.in). **Manjoo Cabs** (☎ 23813083; manjoo.cabs@yahoo.com) is a drivers' cooperative.

## 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). Tickets cost between Rs 5 and 10.

# NORTHERN TAMIL NADU

## CHENNAI TO MAMALLAPURAM

Chennai's urban sprawl continues a fair way south before opening up on the East Coast Rd to Mamallapuram. Along this stretch, known as the Coromandel Coast, are several small beach resorts and wonderful artists' communities, along with less fortunate tsunami-ravaged fishing villages still slowly being rebuilt.

In the village of Injambakkam, 18km south of Chennai, the **Cholamandal Artists' Village** (☎ 044-24490092; cholamandalartvillage.com; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm), set on 4 hectares of land, was created in 1966 as a cooperative where artists and sculptors could live, work and exhibit. Still thriving, the group of traditional thatched-roofed buildings and gardens includes galleries and studios where there are usually artists at work and fine contemporary paintings and sculptures on show and for sale. A new gallery and public exhibition space was being built in 2006, and there are two simple studio-cum-guesthouses available for visiting artists only (Rs 500 per day; book well in advance).

At Muttukadu, 12km south of Cholamandal, is **DakshinaChitra** (☎ 044-27472603; www.dakshinachitra.net; Indian student/adult Rs 25/50, foreign student/adult Rs 70/175; ☎ 10am-6pm, closed Tue), a remarkable cultural centre and arts complex

displaying traditional arts and crafts from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Established by the Madras Crafts Association, the village incorporates traditional buildings and workshops including silk-weavers' houses, potters' sheds and merchants' homes. Static arts and craft displays are complemented by daily interactive demonstrations of pottery, basket weaving, puppet making and palm-leaf decoration (Rs 5 to 25), and free weekend activities include a puppet show and glass blowing. A truly delightful cool, tiled 12-room **guesthouse** (☎ 98414 22149; r without/with AC Rs 550/800) is in the grounds (though you might want to check you're not coinciding with a school overnight excursion). You can also book rooms through the centre.

To reach these places, take any bus heading south to Mamallapuram (bus 188 or 118, Rs 22, one hour) and ask to be let off; an AC taxi for a full day tour costs about Rs 1200.

**Crocodile Bank** (☎ 04114-242511; adult/child Rs 20/10, camera/video Rs 10/75; ☎ 8am-5.30pm, closed Mon), 40km south of Chennai, is a well-regarded breeding farm for crocodiles, alligators and turtles. There are hundreds of reptiles here, including the Indian mugger and gavia crocodiles and the saltwater crocs of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The leafy grounds support more than 50 bird species; keep an eye open for jewel-like kingfishers bobbing above the croc pools. Late afternoon is feeding time (Rs 20). An attached **snake farm** (adult/child Rs 5/3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm) produces antivenin.

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 **mandapa** featuring a crown of carved *yali* (mythical lion creature) heads.

## MAMALLAPURAM (MAHABALIPURAM)

☎ 044 / pop 12,049

Mamallapuram is Tamil Nadu's only true travellers' enclave, a mix of sun, seafood and sand with a dash of seediness thrown in. But it's much more than that. Famous for its ancient rock carvings, especially the Shore Temple, it was once the second capital and seaport of the Pallava kings of Kanchipuram. The village is listed as a World Heritage site and remains a renowned centre for stone carving; you'll see and hear the constant tapping of hammer

and chisel as artisans chip away at exquisite sculptures.

Less than two hours by bus from Chennai, with a reasonably good beach, an excellent combination of cheap accommodation, fish restaurants, handicraft shops, spectacular stone carvings dotted around the town and Tamil Nadu's most highly regarded dance festival (see the boxed text, p1028), it's easy to see why travellers make a beeline here from Chennai and hang around for a while. The local community was affected by the 2004 tsunami but worked hard to get back to sort-of normal as quickly as possible; check out the 'before and after' photos in some of the beachfront restaurants.

### Orientation & Information

Mamallapuram village is tiny and laid-back, with most of the action on East Raja, Othavadai and Othavadai Cross Sts; the latter runs parallel to the beach. The surrounding sites of interest can be explored on foot or by bicycle.

### BOOKSHOP

**JK Bookshop** (☎ 9840442853; Othavadai St; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) A small bookshop where you can buy or swap (Rs 50) books in several languages, including English, French and German. Proceeds support village schools established by the owner.

### INTERNET ACCESS

You'll find internet access everywhere.  
**Hotel Lakshmi Internet** (Othavadai Cross St; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-10pm) Reliable fast connection.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**St Mary's Health Centre** (☎ 27442334; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm) Near the tourist office.

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

### MONEY

The best places to change cash or travellers cheques are the private exchange offices on East Raja St. Other suggestions:

**LKP Forex** (East Raja St; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat)

**Prithvi Exchange** (☎ 243265; East Raja St; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat)

**State Bank of India ATM** (East Raja St; ☎ 24hr)

### POLICE

**All Women Police Station** (GK Mandapam St)  
**Police Station** (Kovalam Rd)

### POST

**Post office** (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Down a small lane just east of the tourist office.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 27442232; East Raja St; ☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Staff can provide you with a map, bus timetables and a bit of aimless conversation.

### Sights

You can easily spend a full day exploring the temples, *mandapas* and rock carvings around Mamallapuram. Apart from the Shore Temple and Five Rathas, admission is free.

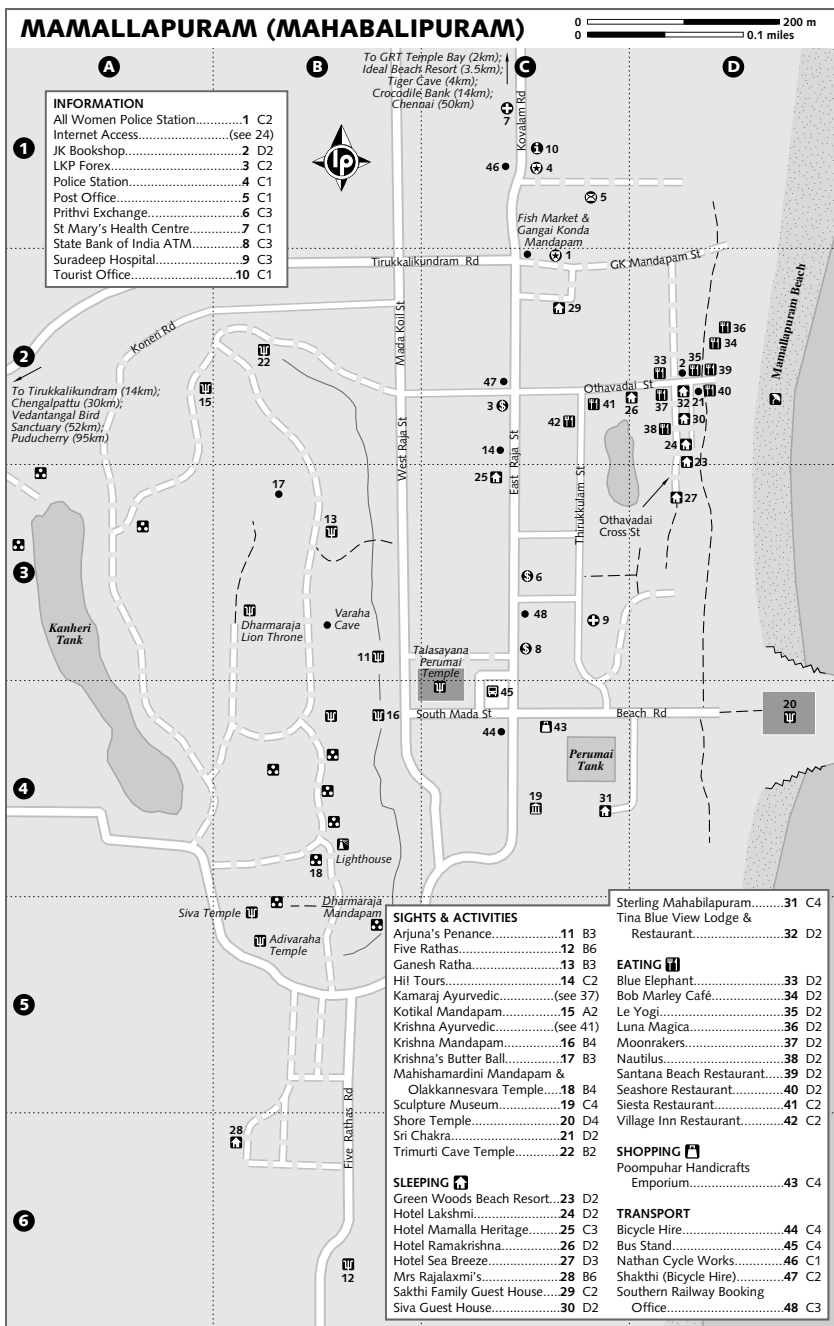
### SHORE TEMPLE

Standing alone and majestic facing the Bay of Bengal (but enclosed by a steel fence), this small but romantic **temple** (combined ticket with Five Rathas Indian/foreigner Rs 10/250, video Rs 25; ☎ 6.30am-6pm), weathered by the wind and sea, represents the final phase of Pallava art. Originally constructed around the middle of the 7th cen-

### THE ROCK CARVINGS OF MAMALLAPURAM

The images carved into the rocks around Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) are like no other in Tamil Nadu. Much religious stonework in the state is alive with complex depictions of gods and goddesses, and images of ordinary folk are conspicuous because of their absence. Yet the splendid carvings at Mamallapuram are distinctive for the simplicity of their folk-art origins. The sculptures show scenes of everyday life – women milking buffaloes, pompous city dignitaries, young girls primping and posing on street corners or swinging their hips in artful come-ons.

Most of the temples and rock carvings here were completed during the reigns of Narasimha Varman I (AD 630–68) and Narasimha Varman II (AD 700–28). But this is not an art form consigned to history. Approximately 200 sculptors line the streets and chisel their stone from dawn to dusk. Indeed Mamallapuram's historical reputation for skilled carvers remains sufficiently intact – the town's craftsmen are frequently commissioned to create sculptures for new temples around the world.





tury, it was later rebuilt by Narasimha Varman II (also known as Rajasimha). The temple's two main spires contain shrines for Shiva. Facing east and west the original linga (phallic images of Shiva) captured the sunrise and sunset. A third and earlier shrine is dedicated to the reclining Vishnu. A remarkable amount of temple carving remains, especially inside the shrines. The temple is now protected from further erosion by a huge rock wall. Like many of Mamallapuram's sights, it's spectacularly floodlit at night.

### FIVE RATHAS

A fine example of Pallava architecture is the **Five Rathas** (Five Rathas Rd; combined ticket with Shore Temple Indian/foreigner Rs 10/250, video Rs 25; ☎ 6.30am-6pm), rock-cut temples resembling chariots. Just 300m from the sea, they were hidden in the sand until excavated by the British 200 years ago.

The Five Rathas derive their names from the champions of the Mahabharata; the Pandavas and their collective wife, Draupadi.

The first *ratha*, **Draupadi Ratha**, on the left after you enter the gate, is dedicated to the goddess Durga. Within, the goddess stands on a lotus, her devotees on their knees in worship. Outside, the huge sculpted lion stands proudly in front of her temple.

Behind the goddess shrine, a huge Nandi (Shiva's bull vehicle) heralds the next chariot, the **Arjuna Ratha**, dedicated to Shiva. Numerous deities, including Indra, the rain god, are depicted on the outer walls.

The next temple chariot, **Bhima Ratha**, honours Vishnu. Within its walls a large sculpture of this deity lies in repose.

The outside walls of **Dharmaraja Ratha**, the tallest of the chariots, portray many deities, including the sun god, Surya, and Indra. The final *ratha*, **Nakula-Sahadeva Ratha**, is dedicated to Indra. The fine sculptured elephant standing next to the temple represents his mount. As you enter the gate, approaching from the north, you see its back first, hence its name **gajaprishtakara** (elephant's backside). This life-sized image is regarded as one of the most perfectly sculptured elephants in India.

### ARJUNA'S PENANCE

This **relief carving** (West Raja St) on the face of a huge rock depicts animals, deities and other semidivine creatures as well as fables from the Hindu Panchatantra books. The panel (30m

by 12m) is divided by a huge perpendicular fissure that's skilfully encompassed into the sculpture; originally, water, representing the Ganges, flowed down it.

It's one of the most convincing and unpretentious rock carvings in India, with the main relief showing Shiva standing with a wizened Arjuna, balanced on one leg in a state of penance. A guide (around Rs 30) can be useful to help explain the reliefs.

### GANESH RATHA & AROUND

This *ratha* is northwest of Arjuna's Penance. Once a Shiva temple, it became a shrine to Ganesh (the elephant-headed god) 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 favourite photo opportunity. The nearby **Kotikal Mandapa** is dedicated to Durga.

Nearby, the **Trimurti Cave Temple** honours the Hindu trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – with a separate section dedicated to each deity.

### MANDAPAMS

Many *mandapas*, featuring fine internal sculptures, are scattered over the main hill. Among them is **Krishna Mandapa**, one of the earliest rock-cut temples and predating the penance relief. Its carvings of a pastoral scene show Krishna lifting up the mythical Govardhana mountain to protect his kinsfolk from the wrath of Indra. Others include **Mahishamardini Mandapa**, just a few metres southwest of the lighthouse. Scenes from the Puranas (Sanskrit stories dating from the 5th century AD) are depicted on the *mandapa* with the sculpture of the goddess Durga considered one of the finest.

Above the *mandapa* are the remains of the 8th-century **Olakkannesvara Temple**, and spectacular views of Mamallapuram. Photography is forbidden here for 'security reasons' – there's a nuclear power station a few kilometres south.

### SCULPTURE MUSEUM

This **museum** (East Raja St; adult/child Rs 2/1, camera Rs 10; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) contains more than 3000 local sculptures in stone, wood, metal and even cement. Some fine paintings are also on display and the front courtyard is littered with sculptures.

## GETTING BETTER AT DOING GOOD

'Great work was done here after the tsunami. The difficulty is in keeping the development sustainable and long term once it's no longer front-page news.'

Paul Knight, director of NGO Earth Aid Asia in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), is musing on the long-term effects of the disaster. 'It became apparent to us that communities inland were also suffering, but indirectly; for example, in poor tribal villages where families relied on occasional day labour to buy food, both work and money dried up and people miles from the coast were literally starving. From the relationships we built with some of these communities then, we're continuing with health, education and income-generating projects – the things they've told us are their priorities – which will both improve their quality of life and help to bring in some money.' You can learn more about Earth Aid's work – and opportunities for volunteers – by dropping into the office in **Bharathi Street** (☎ 9884252252; www.earthaidindia.org). It may also be possible to support its work by staying at its guesthouse.

The needs of poor villagers are not as visible as those of the children who beg for funds for the many orphanages in Mamallapuram. Sometimes it's hard to define their presence as anything less than child exploitation when they should really be in school or playing. If you want to give to the kids, do your homework. Ask around town to get an idea of how children's homes are regarded locally, and give financial donations to reputable charities that support the children in the long term.

## Activities

### BEACH

The village is only about 200m from the wide beach, north of the Shore Temple, where local fishers pull in their boats. The beach is cleaner further north, or to the south of the Shore Temple, and you can take long unimpeded walks, although at high tide you need to walk over the rocks in front of the Shore Temple. 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. Despite the beach scene, Western swimwear is not the norm here and you (and local people) may feel more comfortable if you cover up.

### THERAPIES

There are numerous places offering massage, reiki, yoga and Ayurvedic practices. Sessions cost around Rs 350 for 30 to 45 minutes. **Krishna** (Siesta; Othavadai St) is recommended by both male and female travellers, as is **Kamaraj Ayurvedic** (☎ 27442115; full body Rs 300, face & neck Rs 150), which can be contacted through Moonrakers restaurant (p1050).

**Sri Chakra** (Othavadai St; massage per hr Rs 300; ☎ 8am-9pm) offers Ayurvedic massage as well as yoga sessions (Rs 150) at 7am.

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 masseur care-

fully and if you have any misgivings, don't proceed.

### Tours

To tour Mamallapuram on two wheels, **Hi! Tours** (☎ 27443260; www.hi-tours.com; 123 East Raja St) runs bicycle tours (Rs 250, minimum four people) to local villages and sights, including the Tiger Cave and Tirukkalikundram Temple. The tours run from 8am to 2pm and include guide and lunch. Hi! Tours also organises day trips to Kanchipuram (p1051) and Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary (p1050).

### Sleeping

Mamallapuram is full of traveller accommodation. If you don't mind roughing it too much, you can stay in basic home accommodation with families in the backstreets near the Five Rathas and elsewhere around the village. The rooms and facilities are very simple but travellers' reports are positive. The usual cost is around Rs 50 per day or Rs 300 per week.

The main budget and midrange places are on Othavadai and Othavadai Cross Sts, and top-end hotels are north of town on the road to Chennai.

### BUDGET

**Mrs Rajalaxmi's** (☎ 27442460; r Rs 50) One of several cheap family-run places near the Five Rathas, this is friendly and homy but pretty basic.

Rooms have fans and electricity, and there's a communal squat toilet.

**Sakthi Family Guest House** (☎ 27442577; 6 East Raja St; r Rs 60-150) This rambling old house in the town centre is owned by the affable Mrs Chandra Palani, headmistress of the local primary school. Rooms outside the house are very basic and guests are treated like part of the furniture. There's no sign, but you'll find it hidden down a lane behind the town hall building.

**Hotel Ramakrishna** (☎ 27442331; 8 Othavada; St; s/d/tr Rs 100/150/250) This is a large place on three floors around a central parking area with no garden. Rooms are simple, but clean and good value.

**Tina Blue View Lodge & Restaurant** (☎ 27442319; 34 Othavada; St; r Rs 150-300) Run by the friendly Xavier, Tina Blue is one of Mamallapuram's originals so it looks a bit old hat, but it's set in a leafy garden with chairs and tables outside the rooms and has a bamboo-and-thatch restaurant on stilts.

**Siva Guest House** (☎ 27443234; sivaguesthouse@hotmail.com; 2 Othavada; Cross St; d without/with AC Rs 250-800; ☎) Deservedly popular with travellers, Siva gets consistently good reports. Rooms are spotless and each has a small veranda.

**Green Woods Beach Resort** (☎ 27443243; greenwoods\_resort@yahoo.com; 7 Othavada; Cross St; d without/with AC Rs 300/750; ☎) Although not flash, Green Woods is homely and popular, with a garden and some pleasant rooftop rooms; No 4 has good balcony space.

**Hotel Lakshmi** (☎ 27442463; d without AC Rs 200-500, with AC Rs 850; ☎) At the end of Othavada; Cross St and with beach access, the former Lakshmi Lodge is a long-standing backpacker place. With a tanklike swimming pool and a popular 1st-floor café hang-out, it's maintaining a standard, but the owners can be a little overbearing.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Mamalla Heritage** (☎ 27442060; 104 East Raja St; s/d Rs 850/1050; ☎) In town, this standard midrange place has spacious, comfortable rooms, all with fridge, the pool's a decent size, and there's a quality veg and rooftop restaurant.

**Hotel Sea Breeze** (☎ 27443035; seabreezehotel@hotmail.com; Othavada; Cross St; r from Rs 1075; ☎) The biggest draw here is the shady garden and pool (nonguests can use it for Rs 150) which give the air of a more upmarket resort.

Rooms are pretty standard but bright and spacious.

**Ideal Beach Resort** (☎ 27442240; www.idealresort.com; s/d Rs 1400/1700, cottages from Rs 2200; ☎) With a landscaped tropical garden setting and comfortable rooms or cottages, this low-key beachfront resort is popular with package tours. The design is small and secluded enough to have an intimate atmosphere and there's a lovely open-air poolside restaurant. It's about 3.5km north of town.

**Sterling Mahabalipuram** (☎ 27442287; Shore Temple Rd; d Rs 4950; ☎) In a quiet location near the Shore Temple and set in sprawling, shady grounds, this is a pleasant if overpriced place. Facilities include a bar, restaurant, children's play area, big pool and large old-fashioned rooms.

**GRT Temple Bay** (☎ 27443636; www.grttemplebay.com; r from Rs 5500; ☎) Best of the town's northern resorts, the pool here is beachside, there's a gym, and most of the stylish rooms have sea views and balconies.

## Eating & Drinking

One of the pleasures of Mamallapuram is eating out. Palm-thatched beachside restaurants serve up fresh seafood to the gentle sounds of the ocean. Be sure to ask about prices, though, as most seafood varies by weight or availability and king prawns and lobster can turn out to cost more than you expected. Restaurants are neatly clustered around Othavada; St and the beach, and all have extensive breakfast menus, and vegetable, Continental and Chinese dishes. 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 longer over last drinks, it's the owner, not you, who faces a hefty fine. All places listed are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**Siesta** (Othavada; St; dishes Rs 30-60) On the shaded and breezy rooftop of Sri Murugan Guest House, this tapas restaurant offers – among other things – authentic Spanish omelette, *patatas bravas* (fried potatoes in a spicy sauce), garlic mushrooms and paella.

**Village Inn Restaurant** (☎ 27442151; Thirukkulam St; mains Rs 45-85, beer Rs 75) Tucked away off the main strip, there's cane furniture, a couple of tables on the veranda and Indian classical music playing in the background, with inexpensive seafood, steaks (order in advance) and, surprisingly, Scotch eggs.

**Nautilus** (Othavadai Cross St; mains from Rs 50) This bustling French-run eatery is popular for its espresso coffee and European dishes such as ratatouille, salads, stuffed tomatoes or steak and chips, along with the usual seafood and Indian fare.

**Le Yogi** (☎ 27442571; Othavadai St; mains from Rs 50) Run by a French and Indian couple, this is the place to come for good wholemeal bread, salads, crepes and pasta. Sit up at tables, or loll with a coffee on the comfy floor cushions.

**Moonrakers** (Othavadai St; mains Rs 60-150) Run by three friendly brothers, Moonrakers' food has long been popular with its big menu of seafood, beef and chicken dishes plus breakfast fare such as pancakes and muffins. It's also a busy late-night hang-out where you can get a beer and meet other travellers. Chinese lamps, wagon wheels and wooden carvings decorate the place. Across the road, the newer and more comfortable Blue Elephant Restaurant – run by another brother! – is also recommended.

If beachside ambience and the strains of Bob Marley are what you're after, Bob Marley Café, Seashore Restaurant, Santana Beach Restaurant and Luna Magica are all recommended for fresh seafood; you'll get a good plate of fish for around Rs 70, with other meals from about Rs 40. All are open from about 7am and make a good setting for breakfast too.

## Shopping

Mamallapuram wakes each day to the sound of sculptors' chisels on granite. You can browse hassle-free and buy from the fixed-price **Poompuhar Handicrafts Emporium** (☎ 27442224; South Mada St; ☎ 10am-7pm, closed Wed) or from the craft shops that line the main roads (prices negotiable). Sculptures range from Rs 300 (for a small piece to fit in your baggage) to Rs 400,000 for a massive Ganesh that needs to be lifted with a mobile crane.

## Getting There & Away

Mamallapuram's small but busy bus stand is on the corner of East Raja and South Mada Sts. The most direct service to/from Chennai (Rs 22, two hours, 30 daily) is on buses 188 and 118. The express (ECR) buses are fastest. To Chennai airport take bus 108B (Rs 23, two hours, four daily).

To Puducherry (Rs 35, two hours, nine daily) take bus 188A. To Kanchipuram (Rs 20, two hours, 11 daily) via Tirukkalikundram

and Chengalpattu (Chingleput) take buses 212A or 212H.

To get to Madurai catch a bus to Chengalpattu (Rs 9, one hour, 33 daily) and then a train from there.

Taxis are available from the bus station. Long-distance trips require plenty of bargaining. It's about Rs 900 to Chennai or the airport.

You can make train reservations at the **Southern Railway Booking Office** (East Raja St).

## 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. You can hire bicycles from several places, including the bicycle shops near the bus station, **Nathan Cycle Works** (Kovalam Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm) near the post office, or **Shakthi** (137 East Raja St; ☎ 8am-8pm), for around Rs 30 per day. Shakthi also hires mopeds for around Rs 150 a day, as do several other shops and restaurants around town.

## AROUND MAMALLAPURAM

About 14km west of Mamallapuram, Tirukkalikundram is a pilgrimage centre with the hilltop **Vedagirishvara Temple** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 5-7pm) dedicated to Shiva. It's often called the Eagle Temple; according to legend two eagles come here each day at noon from Varanasi, a good 2000km away. They often don't turn up on time.

You climb the 550 smooth steps to the hilltop bare-footed. Once there, the temple contains two beautiful shrines and at intervals there are 360-degree views of the larger Bhaktavatsaleshvara Temple, the temple tanks, rocky hills and rice paddies. It's lovely – if busy – in the late afternoon but the middle of the day, while making for a hot climb, is very peaceful when the temple itself is closed. You can get here by bus or bicycle from Mamallapuram.

## VEDANTANGAL BIRD SANCTUARY

Located about 52km from Mamallapuram, this wildlife **sanctuary** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 6am-6pm) is one of the best bird-watching places in South India and 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 the breeding season (December and January) there can be up to

30,000 birds nesting in the mangroves, and the best viewing times are early morning and late afternoon; head for the watchtower and look down on the noisy nests across the water. At other times of the year there are no migrants, but enough resident birds to keep keen birders happy.

Big, basic and comfortable rooms are available at the **Forest Department Resthouse** (d Rs 300), a lovely quiet spot 500m before the sanctuary. You're supposed to book in advance with the **WVO** (Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24321471; 4th fl, DMS office, 259 Anna Salai, Teynampet) in Chennai – good luck if you try to do that – but in practice the caretaker will probably find a room for you if one's available. You may or may not be offered food if you arrive unexpectedly; come with snacks just in case, or if you have transport be prepared to drive 10km or so to the nearest evening food stall.

To get there by public transport, first get to Chengalpattu, an hour's bus ride from Mamallapuram (see opposite). From here you can take a bus to Vedantungal via Padalam, where you may have to change buses at the road junction. Most Vedantungal buses go di-

rectly 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 Rs 1000.

## KANCHIPURAM

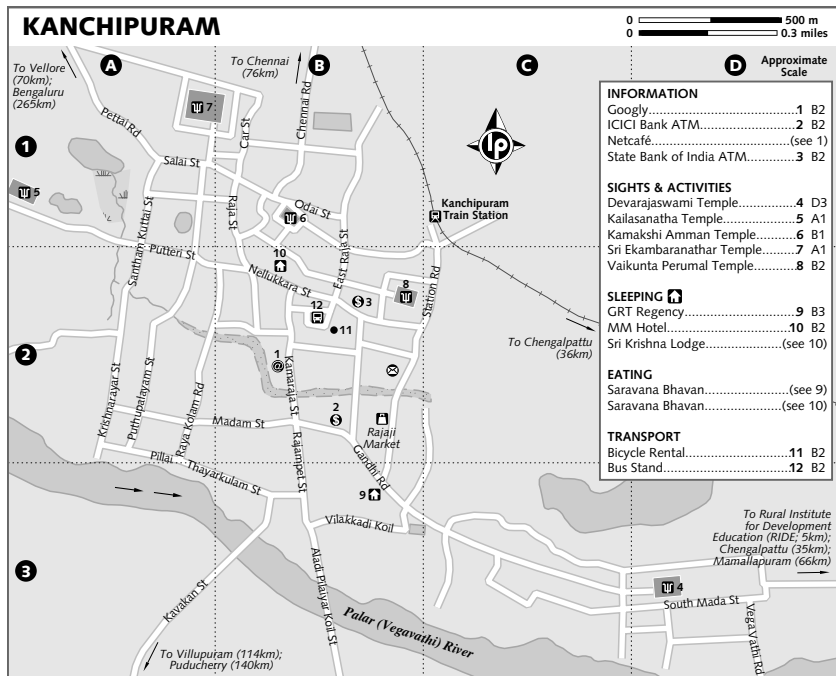
☎ 044 / pop 188,000

Famous throughout India for its silk saris, the temple town of Kanchipuram (Kanchi) is also a treasure-trove of Hindu temples and art from the Pallava, Chola and Pandyan dynasties. Many travellers make a day trip here from Chennai or Mamallapuram, which isn't a bad idea as its attraction for pilgrims and tourists has led to a culture of harassment at some temples and silk shops.

## Orientation & Information

The city is on the main Chennai–Bengaluru road, 76km southwest of Chennai.

There's no tourist office, but for information online check out [www.hellokanchipuram.com](http://www.hellokanchipuram.com). On Kamaraja St there's a small cluster of cheap internet cafés. None of Kanchipuram's banks will touch travellers cheques, but ATMs



## CHILD LABOUR & THE SILK INDUSTRY

The sari is synonymous with Indian style, and a brocade bridal sari from Kanchipuram is among the most coveted of garments. The more expensive ones are shot through with gold and silver and can fetch up to Rs 25,000 and weigh around 1.5kg.

About 80% of Kanchipuram's population depend on hand-weaving for a living, and most of the work is done in private homes as part of a larger cooperative. Such a diffuse operation is notoriously difficult to police. Despite national legislation prohibiting child labour, it is estimated that some 4000 school-aged children in Kanchipuram still work full time in the industry, though the situation has improved markedly in the past five years.

Owners of silk looms pay poor families a significant sum of money to buy the children's labour. The opportunity to receive an amount of money that most families could never otherwise dream about is a powerful lure. The payment is in the form of a loan, which families must later repay. When they are unable to pay, silk loom owners offer further loans at high interest rates, thereby perpetuating the cycle of indebtedness and culture of child labour, which is a foundation of this lucrative industry.

One organisation which is challenging the system is the **Rural Institute for Development Education** (RIDE; ☎ 27268393; www.rideindia.org; 46 Periyar Nagar, Little Kanchipuram 631503), a secular NGO. This impressive agency operates in more than 200 villages in the Kanchipuram district by taking children away from the looms (and from other work such as stone masonry) and placing them into one of 11 special RIDE transition schools for six to 12 months, before facilitating their entry into the government education system.

There are many ways that travellers can assist the institute in its work. Volunteers are welcomed in training teachers, counselling, and helping staff write proposals for funding and project development. Qualified teachers can also, with advance notice, assist with teaching in the schools. Volunteers should be prepared to commit for at least one week, preferably longer, and are accommodated in the organisation's guesthouse. A volunteer fee of US\$100 per week covers costs.

If you're just passing through, RIDE offers a 24-hour programme that includes accommodation, and visits to some or all of: a local village to see the silk-weaving industry at work and meet its participants; a RIDE school; and silk-weaving factories and silk stores which support child-free labour. The cost is Rs 1300 per person; there are abridged half-day programmes for Rs 850. If you're in town to buy silk, think about contacting RIDE, which can put you in direct touch with a weaver; your transaction is then only between you and them, with no commissions or fees paid to salespeople.

The RIDE office is near Pachapayya James College, about 5km east of Kanchipuram. It's a Rs 50 rickshaw ride, and there are good signs on the roadside.

accept foreign cards. Some hotels (and silk shops) accept foreign cash and credit cards.

**Googly** (144 Kamaraja St; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-9pm)  
Internet access.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (Gandhi Rd)

**Netcafé** (148 Kamaraja St; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-9pm)  
Internet access.

**State Bank of India ATM** (Hospital Rd)

## Sights

All the temples are open from 6am to 12.30pm and 4pm to 8.30pm. Most have free admission.

### KAILASANATHA TEMPLE

Dedicated to Shiva, Kailasanatha Temple is the oldest temple in Kanchipuram and

for many it is also the most beautiful. Reflecting the freshness of early Dravidian architecture, it was built by the Pallava king Rayasimha in the late 7th century, though its front was added later by his son, King Varman III.

The remaining fragments of 8th-century murals are a visible reminder of how magnificent the original temple must have looked. There are 58 small shrines honouring Shiva and Parvati and their sons, Ganesh and Murugan.

Non-Hindus are allowed into the inner sanctum here, where there is a prismatic lingam – the largest in town and third-largest in Asia. The guide and priest here are generous with information and, set in a quiet



residential area, this is the most pleasant temple to visit.

### SRI EKAMBARANATHAR TEMPLE

This temple is dedicated to Shiva and is one of the largest in Kanchipuram, covering 12 hectares. Its 59m-high *gopuram* and massive outer stone wall were constructed in 1509 by Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagar empire, though construction was originally started by the Pallavas, with later Chola extensions. 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). Non-Hindus cannot enter the sanctum. If you wish to support the temple, get an official receipt for your donation.

### KAMAKSHI AMMAN TEMPLE

This imposing temple is dedicated to the goddess Parvati in her guise as Kamakshi, who accedes to all requests. To the right of the temple's entrance is the marriage hall, which has wonderful ornate pillars, and directly ahead is the main shrine topped with gold; again, non-Hindus cannot enter the sanctum. Each February/March carriages housing statues of deities are hauled through the streets in a colourful procession. The goddess' birthday is in October/November.

### DEVARAJASWAMI TEMPLE

Dedicated to Vishnu, this enormous **monument** (admission Rs 2, camera/video Rs 5/100) was built by the Vijayanagars and is among the most impressive of Kanchipuram's temples. It has a beautifully sculptured '1000-pillared' hall (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 *mandapa*. The annual temple festival is in May.

Every 40 years the waters of the temple tank are drained, revealing a huge statue of Vishnu. You may like to hang around for the next viewing – in 2019.

### VAIKUNTA PERUMAL TEMPLE

Dedicated to Vishnu, this temple was built shortly after the Kailasanatha Temple. 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, on three levels, contains images of Vishnu in standing, sitting and reclining positions.

### Sleeping & Eating

Don't get too excited about the accommodation options in Kanchi. The cheap pilgrims' lodges are pretty dire, so unless you are on a tight budget, head for one of the better-value midrange places. Most hotels and lodges are clustered together in the noisy town centre, within a few minutes' walk from the bus station.

**Sri Krishna Lodge** (☎ 27222831; 60 Nellukkara St; s/d Rs 160/230) One of the few OK cheapies, the cheerful staff makes up for the drab and tatty interior.

**MM Hotel** (☎ 27227250; www.mmhotels.com; 65 Nellukkara St; d without/with AC Rs 400/700; 🍷) A good-value, busy and clean hotel, frequented by Indian businesspeople. Saravana Bhavan veg restaurant is next door, with a welcome AC dining room.

**GRT Regency** (☎ 27225250; adminkanchi@grtregency.com; 487 Gandhi Rd; s/d Rs 975/1250; 🍷) While it's not the best setting on the noisy main road, the rooms here are the probably the cleanest and most comfortable you'll find in Kanchi. Another Saravana Bhavan restaurant is next door at Hotel Jaybala International.

### Getting There & Away

The busy bus stand is in the centre of town. See the table, below, for bus services.

Regular suburban trains leave from Beach, Fort or Egmore stations in Chennai direct to Kanchipuram (Rs 18, two hours).

#### BUSES FROM KANCHIPURAM

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	100	6	2 daily
Chennai	22.50	2	every 10min
Mamallapuram	20	2	9 daily
Puducherry	30	3	12 daily
Tiruvannamalai	32	3	22 daily
Trichy	90	7	5 daily
Vellore	20	1½	every 15min



## Getting Around

Bicycles can be hired (per hour/day Rs 3/40) from stalls around the bus station. An autorickshaw for a half-day tour of the five main temples (around Rs 200) will inevitably involve a stop at a silk shop.

## VELLORE

☎ 0416 / pop 388,211

Vellore, 145km west of Chennai, is a dusty bazaar town whose well-preserved Vijayanagar Fort and temple are the main features on the tourist trail. The city is also famed for its Christian Medical College (CMC) Hospital – a leader in research and health care, recognised as one of the finest hospitals in India. The hospital attracts international medical students as

well as patients from all over India, giving this small town a cosmopolitan feel.

## Information

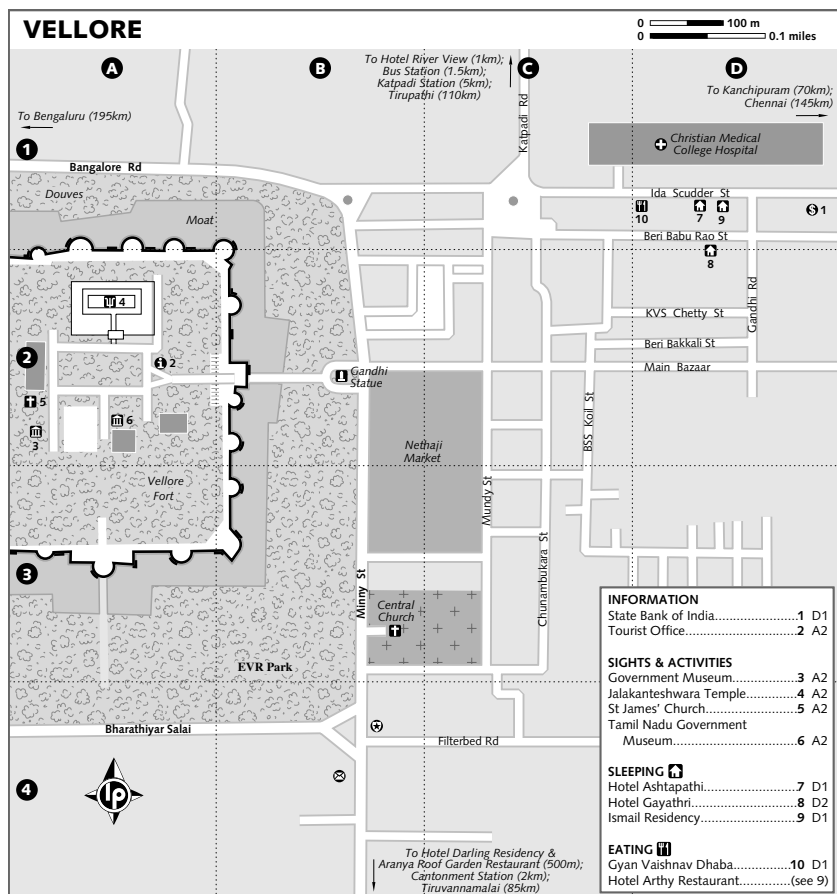
There are several internet cafés along Ida Scudder Rd in front of the hospital and Surf-zone is next to the State Bank of India.

**State Bank of India** (102 Ida Scudder Rd) Money can be exchanged here and there's an ATM.

**Tourist office** (☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Inside the fort complex, to the right of the main gate.

## Sights

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 and an ancient mosque, and a police recruiting school.

At the west side of the fort complex, the small **national government museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Fri) contains sculptures dating back to Pallava and Chola times. Next door, pretty **St James' Church** (1846) is only open for Sunday services.

On the east side, the **Tamil Nadu government museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Fri) displays hero stones in the forecourt, dating from the 8th century and depicting the stories of war heroes in battle. The dusty exhibits inside have seen much better days, but the small collection of tribal clothes and artefacts is interesting.

Near the fort entrance, the **Jalakanteshwara Temple** (☎ 6am-1pm & 3-8pm), a gem of late Vijayanagar architecture, was built about 1566; check out the small detailed sculptures on the walls of the marriage hall. During the invasions by the Adil Shahis of Bijapur, the Marathas and the Carnatic nawabs (Muslim ruling princes), the temple was occupied by a garrison and temple rituals ceased. Now it's once again a place of worship.

## Sleeping & Eating

Vellore's cheapest hotels are concentrated along the roads south of and parallel to the hospital, mostly catering to people in town for treatment; there are many to choose from on Beri Babu Rao St. Decent midrange hotels are scattered further afield.

**Hotel Gayathri** (☎ 2227714; 22 Beri Babu Rao St; s/d Rs 140/170) This dingy place has impersonal service and squat toilets, but at least the shared balconies let in some light.

**Hotel Ashtapathi** (☎ 2224602; Ida Scudder St; r without/with AC Rs 325/525; 🏠) It's small, clean and good value here, but ask for a room off the noisy roadside. There's a decent veg restaurant attached.

**Ismail Residency** (☎ 2223216; Ida Scudder St; r Rs 400; 🏠) A five-room lodge with tatty but spotless rooms, this is next door to the clean Hotel Arthy restaurant.

**Hotel River View** (☎ 2225251; New Katpadi Rd; d without/with AC Rs 470/700; 🏠) North of the town centre and close to the bus station, this hotel

## BUSES FROM VELLORE

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Chennai	46-60	3	every 10min
Bengaluru	74/85	5	every 30min
Kanchipuram	20	2	every 15min
Tirupathi	40	2½	every 30min
Tiruvannamalai	24	2	every 5min
Trichy (direct)	99	7	4 daily

benefits from a relatively quiet location and pleasant gardens, but the 'river view' is hardly that. Rooms are spacious, the Shikar garden restaurant serves a barbecue every evening and there's a bar.

**Darling Residency** (☎ 2213001; 11/8 Officers Line; s/d Rs 750/850; 🏠) Recognised as the best hotel in town, the rooms here are clean and comfortable, 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, serving salads (Rs 25), a variety of pasta, *tandoor* oven and Chinese food for around Rs 60, and good ice cream. It's recommended by visiting medicos and locals alike.

Cheap veg restaurants line Ida Scudder St, or try **Gyan Vaishnav Dhaba** (thalis Rs 25) for good Punjabi food.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The bus stand is about 500m from the Hotel River View, 1.5km to the north of town. For services, see above.

### TRAIN

Vellore's main train station is 5km north at Katpadi. Bus 192 (Rs 2) shuttles between the station and town. There are at least six daily express trains to/from Chennai Central (2nd class/sleeper Rs 42/67), which continue to Bengaluru (Rs 65/104).

## TIRUVANNAMALAI

☎ 04175 / pop 130,301

The small, unassuming town of Tiruvannamalai, 85km south of Vellore, is something of a hidden gem in a region overwhelmed by significant temples. Flanked by Mt Arunachala, this is an important Shaivite town where Shiva is revered as Arunachaleswar, an aspect of fire. At each full moon the hill

swells with thousands of pilgrims who circumnavigate the base of the mountain, but at any time you'll see gatherings of Shaivite priests, sadhus (spiritual men) and devotees gathered around the temple. Tiruvannamalai is also home to the Sri Ramanasramam Ashram.

The main post office is just off the road to Gingee; there are several internet cafés in town and opposite the ashram. Although the State Bank of India won't change travellers cheques, its ATM accepts international cards.

## Sights & Activities

### ARUNACHALESWAR TEMPLE

Covering some 10 hectares, this vast temple (☎ 6am-1pm & 5.30-10pm) is one of the largest, and most captivating, in India. Although it dates from the 11th century, much of the structure is actually from the 17th to 19th centuries. It has four large unpainted *gopurams*, one at each cardinal point, with the eastern one rising to 66m with 13 storeys.

The main (eastern) entrance to the temple is reached by a covered walkway lined with trinket sellers, merchants, half-naked sadhus and orange-clad priests – the atmosphere here in the evenings is noisy and electric. You may be approached to donate rice cakes for the poor that, at Rs 50 for 10, you can then hand to recipients; this may be preferable to handing a few rupees to a beggar. Once inside the temple, there's a 1000-pillared *mandapa* on the right and the large tank on the left, then another gateway leads through a central courtyard containing the main shrine, a Shiva lingam where *puja* is performed daily at 8am, 10am, 6pm, 8pm and 9.30pm. You're likely to wander here comfortably without attracting too much attention.

### MT ARUNACHALA

This 800m-high boulder-strewn hill, known locally as Girivalam, looms over the town. 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 – stopping at small temples and shrines along the way – for around Rs 120. An alternative is to pick up a circle map from the ashram office, hire a bicycle (per hour Rs 3) from the road near the entrance, and bike your way around.

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.

### SRI RAMANA ASHRAM

This tranquil ashram (☎ 237292; www.ramana-maharshi.org; ☎ office 8am-11am & 2-5pm), 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 take part in *puja* at the shrine where the guru achieved samadhi (ecstatic state involving conscious exit from the body) and to use the bookshop. Day visits are permitted but *devotees only* may stay at the ashram by applying in writing, preferably at least three months in advance.

## THE LINGAM OF FIRE

Legend has it that Shiva appeared as a column of fire on Mt Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, creating the original symbol of the lingam. Each November/December full moon, the **Karthikai Deepam Festival**, one of India's oldest festivals, celebrates this legend throughout India but the festival is 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 (14km). On the upward path, steps quickly give way to jagged and unstable rocks. There's no shade and 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.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are budget lodges in the busy area around the temple and in the calmer surrounds near the ashram. During festival time (November/December) prices can rise by a staggering 1000%.

**Arunachala Ramana Home** (☎ 236120; s/d Rs 150/200) Recommended as basic, clean and friendly. It's close to the fabulous Manna Café which will answer any need you may have for non-Indian food, including salads (Rs 25), juices, pastas and cakes. Plenty of chai (tea) stalls and veg cafés are nearby.

**Hotel Ganesh** (☎ 2226701; 111A Big St; d without/with AC Rs 245/645; ☺) On the busy bazaar road running along the north side of the temple, Ganesh is a little haven of peace and excellent value. Some of the rooms are a bit poky, but they're clean enough and the hotel's inner courtyard balcony is a pleasant place to sit. There's a decent veg restaurant downstairs.

**Hotel Arunai Anantha** (☎ 237275; hotelarunai.anantha@yahoo.co.in; s/d Rs 1100/1250; ☺) The big draws at this hotel, about 1km beyond the ashram, are the landscaped gardens and swimming pool. For deluxe rooms add Rs 300; they're worth it for the extra size and comfort.

## Getting There & Away

There are buses every half-hour to Chennai (Rs 62, 3½ hours) and Vellore (Rs 23, two hours). There are at least three daily buses to Puducherry (Rs 31, three hours). A taxi to Puducherry (via Gingee) costs around Rs 800.

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

## GINGEE (SENJI)

☎ 04145

The twin ruined forts of **Rajagiri & Krishnagiri** (King & Queen Fort; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am–5pm) crown the hilltops as you pass through rural countryside near Gingee (*shin-gee*), 37km east of Tiruvannamalai. Constructed mainly in the 16th century by the Vijayanagars (though some structures date from the 13th century), the fort has been occupied by various armies, including the forces of Adil Shah from Bijapur and the Marathas, who assumed control from 1677. In 1698 the Mughals took over. Then came the French, who remained until the British defeated them at Puducherry.

Nowadays the forts are delightfully free of human activity – except for the odd picnicker or herd of goats you may find you've got the place to yourself. A walk around will take half a day, especially if you cross the road and make the steep ascent to the top of Krishnagiri. Buildings within the main fort (on the south side of the road) include a granary, a Shiva temple, a mosque and – most prominent – the restored audience hall.

It's easy to day trip to Puducherry from Puducherry (67km) or Tiruvannamalai (37km). Buses leave every 30 minutes from Tiruvannamalai (Rs 11.50, one hour). Ask to be let off at 'the fort', 2km before Gingee town. An autorickshaw from Gingee to the fort costs about Rs 25 one way.

## PUDUCHERRY (PONDICHERY)

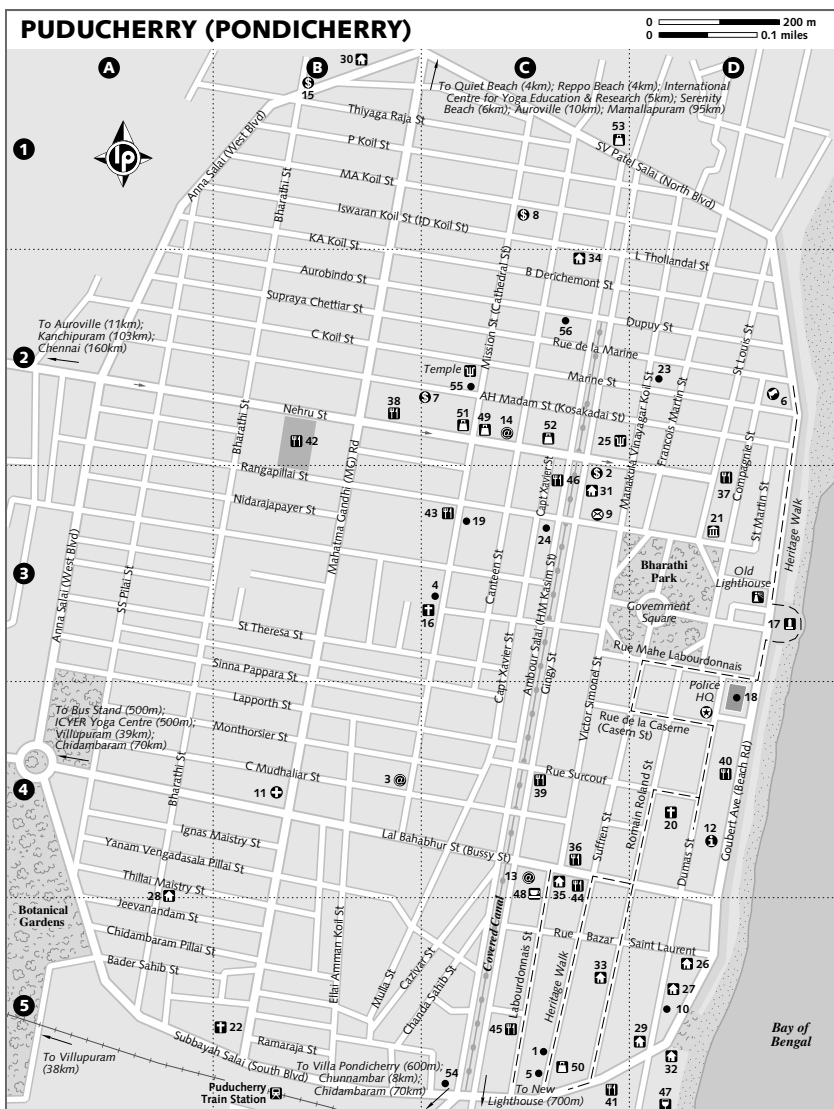
☎ 0413 / pop 220,749

With its seafront promenade, wide boulevards, enduring pockets of French culture and architecture, and a popular ashram, charming Puducherry – whose name officially changed from Pondicherry in October 2006 – is unlike anywhere else in South India. That's hardly surprising – the former French colony was settled in the early 18th century as a colonial enclave and it retains a mildly Gallic air superimposed on a typical Indian background.

The French relinquished their control of the Union Territory of 'Pondy' (as the city is still universally known) some 50 years ago, but reminders of the colonial days remain; the *tricolore* flutters over the grand French consulate, there's a *hôtel de ville* (town hall), and local police wear red *kepis* (caps) and belts. Don't expect a subcontinental Paris though – this is still India, with all the autorickshaws, choked streets, bazaars and Hindu temples of any city.

A big draw in Puducherry is its alluring restaurants – many serving an approximation of French cuisine – and some superb hotels that make use of the town's French architectural heritage. Without the crippling taxes of Tamil Nadu, beer is relatively cheap and accommodation good value.

Many travellers come here to study yoga or meditation at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, so there's always a large contingent of foreigners in Puducherry. In any case, this easy-going coastal city is firmly on the travellers' itinerary and you may find yourself staying here longer than you had intended.



## Orientation

Puducherry is split from north to south by a partially covered canal. The more 'French' part of town is on the east side (towards the sea) and the more typically Indian part to the west. With its grid design, navigating the town is easy, but there are still some eccentricities with street names. Many have one name at

one end and another at the other, while others use the French 'rue' instead of 'street'. See the boxed text, opposite, for more information.

## Information

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

INFORMATION					
Alliance Française.....	1 C5	Prana Ayurvedic Massage.....	(see 45)	kasha ki aasha.....	39 C4
Canara Bank.....	2 C3	Puducherry Museum.....	21 D3	La Coromandale.....	40 D4
Coffee.Com.....	3 B4	Sacred Heart Church.....	22 B5	La Terrasse.....	41 C5
Fabindia.....	(see 50)	Sri Aurobindo Ashram.....	23 D2	Market.....	42 B2
Focus Books.....	4 C3	Sri Aurobindo Information Centre.....	24 C3	Nilgiri Supermarket.....	43 C3
French Bookshop.....	5 C5	Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple.....	25 C2	Rendezvous.....	44 C4
French Consulate.....	6 D2			Satsanga.....	45 C5
ICICI Bank.....	7 C2	<b>SLEEPING</b>		Your Daily Bread.....	46 C3
ICICI Bank.....	8 C1	Ajantha Beach Guest House.....	26 D5		
LKP Forex.....	(see 48)	Ajantha Sea View.....	(see 26)	<b>DRINKING</b>	
Main Post Office.....	9 C3	Dumas Guest House.....	27 D5	Seagulls Restaurant.....	47 D5
Maison Colombani.....	10 D5	Ganga Guest House.....	28 A4	Space Coffee & Arts.....	48 C4
New Medical Centre.....	11 B4	Hotel de Pondicherry.....	29 D5		
Puducherry Tourist Office.....	12 D4	Hotel Sarguru.....	30 B1	<b>SHOPPING</b>	
Sify i-way.....	13 C4	International Guest House.....	31 C3	Auroboutique.....	(see 23)
Sify i-way.....	14 C2	Park Guest House.....	32 D5	Casablanca.....	49 C2
Sify i-way.....	(see 37)	Patricia Coloniale Heritage Guest House.....	33 C5	Fabindia.....	50 C5
UTI Bank ATM.....	15 B1	Surya Swastika Guest House.....	34 C2	Kalki.....	51 C2
		Villa Helena.....	35 C4	kasha ki aasha.....	(see 39)
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>				La Boutique d'Auroville.....	52 C2
Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.....	16 C3	<b>EATING</b>		Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper Factory.....	53 C1
Gandhi Statue.....	17 D3	Au Feu de Bois.....	36 C4	<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall).....	18 D4	Coffee.Com.....	(see 3)	Bicycle Hire.....	54 C5
Jayalaxmi Fine Arts Academy.....	19 C3	Grinde Sridharan General Merchants.....	37 D3	SDP Bike Hire.....	55 C2
Notre Dame de Agnes.....	20 D4	Hot Breads.....	(see 46)	Vijay Arya Moped Rental.....	56 C2
		Hotel Aristo.....	38 B2		

## BOOKSHOPS

**Fabindia** (☎ 2226010; 59 Suffren St; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm) Opposite the Alliance Française and above the craft shop is a good choice of English-language titles.

**Focus Books** (☎ 2345513; 204 Mission St; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9pm Mon-Sat) Excellent selection of books, especially contemporary Indian writing, and postcards.

**French Bookshop** (☎ 2338062; Suffren St; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm) This small shop next to the Alliance Française carries many French titles.

## 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, art gallery, and conducts French-language classes. Films are shown on Sunday at 6pm. 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 hr Rs 20; ☎ 10am-1am) Hip café with high-speed connections and great coffee.

**Sify i-way** Lal Bahabhur St (per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am-midnight); Nehru St (per hr Rs 25; ☎ 24hr); St Louis St (per hr Rs 25; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) Part of the i-way chain, these have fast connections and cheap internet phone calls.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**New Medical Centre** (☎ 343434; 470 Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd; ☎ 24hr)

## MONEY

**Canara Bank** (Gingy St; ☎ 10am-2pm & 2.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques, plus an ATM.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (Mission St & AH Madam St)

**LKP Forex** (☎ 2224008; 2A Labourdonnais St; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-6.30pm Sat) Good place to change a wide range of currencies and travellers cheques, plus money transfers.

**UTI Bank ATM** (Anna Salai)

## POST

**Main post office** (Rangapillai St; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Post restante is available 10am to 5pm Monday to Saturday.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Puducherry tourist office** (☎ 2339497; 40 Goubert Ave; ☎ 9am-5pm) Enthusiastic staff and a decent free map.

## Sights & Activities

### FRENCH QUARTER

The best way to view the slightly tattered heritage buildings and broad streets of the French Quarter (bounded roughly by NSC Bose St, SV Patel Rd and Goubert Ave) is to take

## RENAMED STREETS

Street name	Alternative name
Mission St	Cathedral St
Ambour Salai	HM Kasim St
AH Madam St	Kosakadai St
Beach Rd	Goubert Ave
Lal Bahabhur St	Bussy St
Gingee Salai	NC Bose St



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 **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**. Focus Books (p1059) sells heritage walking trail brochures (Rs 9).

### SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM

Founded in 1926 by Sri Aurobindo and a Frenchwoman known as 'the Mother', this **ashram** (cnr rue de la Marine & Manakula Vinayagar Koil St) propounds spiritual tenets that represent a synthesis of yoga and modern science. After Aurobindo's death spiritual authority passed to the Mother, who died in 1973 aged 97. These days, the ashram underwrites many cultural, educational and social welfare activities in Puducherry.

A constant flow of visitors files through the **main ashram building** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat), which has the flower-festooned samadhi (tomb venerated as a shrine) of Aurobindo and the Mother in the central courtyard, where devotees gather and meditate. Opposite the main building, in the educational centre, you can sometimes catch a film, play or lecture, and there are occasional evening music performances in the library. For other information, call at the **ashram information centre** (☎ 2233604; bureaucentral@sriurobindoashram.org; cnr Rangapillai & Ambour Salai; ☎ 6am-8pm).

### PUDUCHERRY MUSEUM

This **museum** (St Louis St; adult/child Rs 2/1; ☎ 9.40am-1pm & 2-5.20pm Tue-Sun), housed in an interesting old colonial building, features a well-presented collection, including sculptures from the Palava and Chola dynasties, fine bronzes, coins and an archaeological display of artefacts from the days of Roman trade with India. There's a striking collection of French colonial paraphernalia which includes a 19th-century *pousse pousse* (like a rickshaw, except pushed along), a horse-drawn carriage, colonial furniture, an antique grandfather clock and a bed slept in by the peripatetic Dupleix, the colony's most famous governor.

### CHURCHES & TEMPLES

Puducherry has several churches built by French missionaries which contribute greatly to the city's Mediterranean flair. The **Church**

**of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception** (Mission St) was completed in 1791. Its medieval architecture is in the style of many of the Jesuit constructions of that time. The **Sacred Heart Church** (Subbayah Salai) is an impressive sight with its Gothic architecture, stained glass and striking brown and white colours. 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.

Although Puducherry is not often associated with temples, the Hindu faith is celebrated here with as much vigour as anywhere – there are said to be more than 150 temples in the Puducherry area and you'll often stumble across the entrance to an almost-hidden temple while wandering the central streets, particularly west of the canal. One of the most vibrant in the city is **Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple** (Manakula Vinayagar Koil St; ☎ 5.45am-12.30pm & 4-9.30pm), dedicated to Ganesh. Renovations have furnished its sanctum with Rajasthan marble and its *vimana* (a tower over the sanctum) with a gold roof. It's tucked away down a backstreet just south of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and also contains more than 40 skilfully painted friezes.

### BOTANICAL GARDENS

Established by the French in 1826, the **botanical gardens** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm) form a green oasis on the southwest side of the city.

### BEACHES

The long stretch of city 'beach' is virtually devoid of sand, but the promenade is a fun place to walk at dawn and dusk when it seems that all of Puducherry takes its daily constitutional exercise. 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, some resort accommodation, water sports and backwater boat cruises. The tourist office (p1059) has details.

### Courses

#### ARTS

**Jayalakshmi Fine Arts Academy** (☎ 2342036; goodsin@vsnl.net.in; 221 Mission St; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 7am-12.30pm Sun) is an established place with classes in *bharatanatyam* (dance), singing, *veena* (stringed instrument), tabla



(drums) and a range of other musical instruments. Private tuition fees start at Rs 200 per hour for a minimum of five hours, and there's a one-off registration fee (Rs 350).

## YOGA & AYURVEDA

Puducherry's International Yoga Festival is held annually in early January.

**International Centre for Yoga Education & Research** (ICYER; ☎ 2241561; www.icyer.com; 16A Mettu St, Chinnamudaliarchavady, Kottukuppam) Also known as the Ananda Ashram, established by Swami Gitananda, this renowned centre conducts annual six-month yoga teacher-training courses and 10-day summer courses. Its city office is Yoganjali Natyalayam (25 2nd Cross Iyyana Nagar), near the bus stand.

**Prana Ayurvedic Massage** (☎ 2331214; 101 Canteen St) Ayurvedic massage (Rs 400 an hour), steam bath (Rs 150) and yoga classes (Rs 150 an hour). Inquire at Satsanga restaurant (p1062).

**Sri Aurobindo Ashram** (☎ 23396483; bureaucentral@sriurobindoashram.org; Rangapillai St) Study and/or practise yoga (see also opposite).

## Tours

The Puducherry tourist office runs half-day sightseeing tours (Rs 90, 2pm to 6pm) that take you to the water sports complex at Chunnambar, Hanuman Temple, Auroville and Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Full-day tours (Rs 110, 9.30am to 6pm) cover the same area plus the botanical gardens, paper factory, Sacred Heart Church and a couple of Hindu temples; both tours need a minimum of six people to operate.

## Sleeping

Puducherry has some of South India's best accommodation in the midrange and top-end bracket – charming old colonial houses and gorgeously decorated guesthouses. At the budget end there's ashram accommodation and basic Indian lodges. The most pleasant part of town is east of the canal, but accommodation is scattered far and wide.

## BUDGET

If you've come to Puducherry to sample ashram life, the best budget places are the guesthouses run by Sri Aurobindo Ashram. They're well maintained, well located and you'll be around like-minded souls. However, the accommodation is set up for ashram devotees, and rules include a 10.30pm curfew, and smoking and alcohol ban. For informa-

tion and reservations, contact the **information centre** (☎ 2233604; bureaucentral@sriurobindoashram.org; cnr Rangapillai & Ambour Salai Sts; ☎ 6am-8pm).

**Surya Swastika Guest House** (☎ 2343092; 11 Iswaran Koil St; d without/with bathroom Rs 100/150) You get just what you pay for in this small old-style guesthouse, with its simple rooms.

**International Guest House** (☎ 2336699; Gingy St; old wing from Rs 100, new from Rs 450; ☎) The most central of the ashram guesthouses, this large, ordered place fronts the canal in the city centre.

**Park Guest House** (☎ 233644; Goubert Ave; d without/with AC Rs 400/600; ☎) This is the most sought-after ashram address in town thanks to its wonderful seafront position. All front rooms point to the sea and have their own porch or balcony, and there's a large lawn area for morning yoga or meditation.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Ganga Guest House** (☎ 2222675; 479 Bharathi St; r Rs 500-600) A fabulous colonnaded old house, decked out in deep reds and yellows and awash in Bollywood posters, offers rooms here. Those on the rooftop get a breeze, and some have balconies.

**Villa Pondicherry** (☎ 2356253; www.pondy.org; 23 Dr Ambedkar Salai; d with shared/private bathroom from Rs 550/650; ☎) This ageing but charming colonial family residence is about 1km south of the train station next to St Francis Xavier Church. The five rooms and central lounge certainly have character and fun décor, but some may find it a little too homely. It's not well signposted – look for the red door and small brass plaque under the veranda.

**Dumas Guest House** (☎ 2225726; 31 Dumas St; s/d Rs 600/750; ☎) A tall, thin rabbit warren of nooks and crannies, this tidy six-room guesthouse opened in 2006 in a good location.

**Ajantha Beach Guest House** (☎ 2338898; 1 rue Bazar St Laurent; d with sea view Rs 600-1200; ☎) The location is the main selling point for this place – right on the beachfront promenade. The four sea-view rooms are plain but comfortable and have balconies; the others are drab and windowless.

**Hotel Surguru** (☎ 2339022; www.hotelsurguru.com; 104 SV Patel Salai; s/d Rs 730/890; ☎) If you're content in a comfortable but characterless business-type hotel, Surguru is the best value in Puducherry. It's large and modern, with bright, spacious rooms and satellite TV. There's a good veg restaurant and credit cards are accepted.

**Hotel de Pondichery** (☎ 2227409; 38 Dumas St; r from Rs 1350-2450; 🏠) Yet another heritage home, this recently renovated place has 10 lovely colonial-style rooms and outdoor sitting terraces. It's more old-world than luxurious but rooms are private and quiet, set back from the courtyard restaurant.

**Villa Helena** (☎ 2226789; villahelena@satyam.net.in; 22 Lal Bahadur St; r Rs 1500-2500; 🏠) This is a superb colonial home with a touch of class at reasonable prices. The five rooms are immaculate and individually designed and the spacious courtyard is elegant and tranquil. If it's full, ask about the owner's other properties.

**Ajantha Sea View** (☎ 2349032; www.ajanthaseaviewhotel.com; 50 Goubert Ave; r from Rs 1750; 🏠) With full beachfront balconies, these rooms have the best view in town. Go for the corner deluxe rooms, full of light with windows on two sides.

**Patricia Coloniale Heritage Guest House** (☎ 2224 720; colonialeheritage@rediffmail.com; 54 Romain Roland St; r incl breakfast Rs 1800-3000; 🏠) For an intimate, peaceful stay, Patricia's is hard to beat. The delightful colonial home is run by a friendly family and the six rooms all have exotic but original character with stained-glass window panes, traditional Indian furniture and a lovely central garden where breakfast is served in a sunken courtyard. If it's full, ask the owners about their other properties.

## Eating

If you've been on the road in Tamil Nadu for a while you'll find Puducherry's restaurant scene a revelation. There are several French-Indian places, some good open-air restaurants, beer is relatively cheap and you can sample both Indian and imported wines. At the other end of the scale, you can eat cheaply at the ashram. Places listed are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner unless otherwise specified.

**La Coromandale** (30 Goubert Ave; mains Rs 30) As the saying goes, the simple things in life are often the best. Tasty South Indian thalis, rice, noodles, cold drinks and a relaxed atmosphere for meeting and chatting are the attractions of this open-fronted restaurant, situated on the promenade and popular with locals.

**Coffee.Com** (☎ 2339079; 236 Mission St; ☎ 10am-1am) This internet café and meeting spot serves up great baguettes (Rs 50 to 70), pasta dishes (Rs 130 to 180), good coffee, pastries and milkshakes.

**kasha ki aasha** (☎ 2222963; www.kasha-ki-aasha.com; 23 rue Surcouf; ☎ 8am-7pm, closed Sun) 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-café. Loll on comfy chairs under the fans, read magazines, drink organic tea and coffee and chat with the all-women staff.

**Hotel Aristo** (Nehru St; mains around Rs 80-150; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat-Thu) The rooftop restaurant at Aristo continues to be a great choice and is usually crowded in the evenings. Dishes include walnut chicken with brown rice (delicious but generally made with cashews!) and grilled prawns. A small Kingfisher (known here as 'secret tea') is Rs 40.

**La Terrasse** (☎ 2220809; 5 Subbayah Salai; pizzas Rs 80-175; ☎ Thu-Tue) This simple semi-open-air place near the southern end of the promenade has a wide menu but is deservedly best known for good pizzas and safe salads. No alcohol is served.

**Au Feu de Bois** (☎ 2341821; 28 Lal Bahadur St; pizzas Rs 100-140; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) With a wood-fired pizza oven, this no-frills place serves pizzas only in its small rooftop courtyard and rustic dining room.

**Satsanga** (☎ 2225867; 30-32 Labourdonnais St; mains around Rs 100-150) In the covered backyard of a rambling colonial house, Satsanga serves up tasty French and Italian food and is a good place for a casual salad lunch (Rs 70) or dinner. It's also great for breakfast from 9am (Rs 25 to 50) – freshly baked bread, crepes, fruit and yogurt – or coffee with the morning paper in hand, relaxing in low-slung chairs under the balcony.

**Rendezvous** (☎ 2330238; 30 Suffren St; mains Rs 100-275; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) The food here is regarded by many locals and expats as the best in town. Served rooftop or in AC comfort, the menu includes such French classics as bouillabaisse, quiches and *coq au vin* (chicken with red wine), along with burgers, pizzas, Indian and Chinese. Wine as well as beer is served.

## SELF-CATERING

**Nilgiri Supermarket** (cnr Mission & Rangapillai St; ☎ 9.30am-9pm) A well-stocked, modern place in which to shop for groceries in air-conditioned comfort. Credit cards are accepted.

**Grinde Sridharan General Merchants** (☎ 2221232; grspondy@sify.com; 25 St Louis St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm Mon-Sat) An excellent, long-established grocery store

with plenty of imported goods and an exchange facility for cash and travellers cheques.

Neighbouring bakeries Your Daily Bread and Hot Breads are on Ambour Salai, selling terrific French bread, croissants and other baked goodies from 7am daily. The main fresh produce market is west of MG Rd, between Nehru and Rangapillai Sts.

## Drinking & Entertainment

With low taxes on alcohol, Puducherry has a reputation for cheap booze. The reality is you'll really only find cheap beer (Rs 30) in 'liquor shops' or the darkened bars attached to them. While you can sometimes get a large Kingfisher for Rs 60, the better restaurants charge up to Rs 100. There are a few exceptions and the greatest concentration of local bars can be found along the northern stretch of Anna Salai (West Blvd).

**Seagulls Restaurant** (19DumasSt; ☎ 11.30am-11.30pm) Although this is a restaurant, the waiters generally look bewildered if you order food. But the location, with a balcony overlooking the sea and views north along the promenade, makes it great for a beer (cheap at Rs 60) on a warm evening; an expansive downstairs veranda was being constructed when we visited.

**Coffee.Com** (☎ 2339079; www.coffeedotcom.net; 236 Mission St; ☎ 10am-1am) Puducherry's cosmopolitan vibe is typified by this hip little internet hang-out. It's a meeting place where you can go online, read magazines, drink espresso coffee and there's a widescreen TV and a selection of DVDs (Rs 100 per hour).

**Space Coffee & Arts** (☎ 2356253; 2 Labourdonnais St; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Space is a funky little semi-

open-air café for juice, coffee or beer (Rs 75) and tapas (from Rs 60) in the evening, and it's also a gallery and performing-arts venue with traditional dance often performed on Saturday.

## Shopping

Shopping in Puducherry, especially on Nehru St, Mission St and MG Rd, is a strange blend of Indian-bazaar-meets-Western-style opulence, with sari and textile stalls competing for space with modern, neon-lit speciality shops.

**Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper Factory** (☎ 2334 763; 50 SV Patel Salai; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) Fine handmade paper is sold at the shop here, and you can ask at the counter about tours of the factory. There's a wider choice of goods at Auroboutique near the ashram; all sales support its work.

**Fabindia** (☎ 2226010; www.fabindia.com; 59 Suffren St; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm) Opposite Alliance Française, this shop has a stunning variety of quality woven goods and furnishings, traditionally made but with a contemporary feel; clothing, however, seems designed more for whippet-thin models than for most people. In operation since 1960, one of its selling points is its 'fair, equitable and helpful relationship' with the village producers of the goods. Upstairs is the very good French Bookshop (p1059).

**La Boutique d'Auroville** (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 woodcarvings; you can also pick

## BUSES FROM PUDUCHERRY (PONDICHERRY)

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency	Type
Bengaluru	125	8	6 daily	Deluxe
Chennai	55	3½	83 daily	Exp
Chidambaram	23	1½	50 daily	State
Coimbatore	159	9	6 daily	Deluxe
Kanchipuram	40	3	5 daily	State
Karaikal	43	3½	15 daily	State
Kumbakonam	33	4	6 daily	State
Mamallapuram	33	2	5 daily	State
Nagapattinam	48	4	4 daily	State
Tirupathi	90	6	9 daily	Deluxe
Tiruvannamalai	25	3½	9 daily	State
Trichy	73	5	4 daily	Deluxe

up an Auroville map (Rs 10) if you're planning to visit.

**kasha ki aasha** (☎ 2222963; www.kasha-ki-aasha.com; 23 rue Surcouf; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Fabulous fabrics and gorgeous garments and crafts that are sourced directly from their makers are sold in this lovely old colonial house. The roof terrace serves great coffee and light meals.

For a modern take on Indian souvenirs and fashions, check out the excellent **Casa-blanca** (165 Mission St; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat & 9am-9pm Sun). Opposite, **Kalki** (☎ 2339166; 134 Mission St; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) showcases and sells exquisite-quality clothes and crafts.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The bus stand is 500m west of town. See p1063 for details of services.

### TAXI

Air-conditioned taxis from Puducherry to Chennai cost around Rs 2700 and to Chennai airport Rs 2500.

### TRAIN

There are two direct services a day to Chennai (Rs 58, five hours), and one to Tirupathy. There's a computerised booking service for southern trains at the station.

## Getting Around

One of the best ways to get around is by walking. Large three-wheelers shuttle between the bus stand and Gingy St for Rs 5, but they're hopelessly overcrowded. Cycle- and autorickshaws are plentiful – an autorickshaw across town costs about Rs 30.

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 Subbayah Salai and Goubert Ave. The usual rental is Rs 5 per hour, or Rs 20 per day, but some places ask Rs 70.

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 Rs 100 a day for a gearless scooter and Rs 125 for a motorbike, with a discount for several days' hire. You need to show some ID (such as a driving licence) and leave Rs 500 deposit. Try **Vijay Arya** (23 Aurobindo St) for moped hire.

## AUROVILLE

☎ 0413

Just over the border from Puducherry is the international community of Auroville – a project in 'human unity' that has ballooned to encompass more than 80 rural settlements spread over 20km, and about 1800 residents. Two-thirds of these are foreigners, representing around 38 different nationalities.

Auroville is not a tourist attraction, and casual visitors may find it a bit bewildering and unwelcoming. Each settlement has its own area of work interest and expertise – from traditional medicinal plants to renewable energy to organic farming to women's groups, to name just a few – and most Aurovillians are busy simply getting on with their work and lives in these communities off the main road. But if you're at all interested in the philosophy it's worth the ride out to the visitors centre to find out how it all works, to eat some great food at the café, and maybe stay at a guesthouse in one of the settlements that suits your interests.

At the spiritual and physical centre of Auroville is an astonishing structure called the Matrimandir, looking something like a cross between a giant golden golf ball and a NASA space project. It contains a silent inner chamber lined with white marble and housing a solid crystal (the largest in the world) 70cm in diameter. Rays from the sun are beamed into this crystal from a tracking mirror in the roof. On cloudy days, solar lamps do the job. But you won't actually see this; the Matrimandir is not open to casual visitors. A section of the **gardens** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-4.30pm daily except Sun afternoon), from which you can see the structure, can be visited; you need to pick up a pass (free) from the information service (below).

## Information

There's a photographic exhibition and video room at the **Auroville Information Service** (admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1.30-5.30pm), which also issues garden passes for external views of the Matrimandir (from 9.45am to 12.30pm and 1.45pm to 4pm only). In the same complex, the **visitors centre** (☎ 2622239; www.auroville.org; ☎ 9am-6pm) contains a bookshop, café, and Boutique d'Auroville, which sells Aurovillian handicrafts.

## Sleeping & Eating

People with a serious interest in the aims of Auroville can stay with any one of the 40 community groups here. A stay of no shorter than

## AUROVILLE: THE INTERNATIONAL VISION

Auroville is the brainchild of the Mother, 'an experiment in international living where people could live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, politics and nationalities'. Designed by French architect Roger Anger, its opening ceremony on 28 February 1968 was attended by the president of India and representatives of 124 countries, who poured the soil of their lands into an urn to symbolise universal oneness.

The geographical layout of Auroville was seen as a reflection of this striving for unity. At the community's centre stands the Matrimandir, which the Mother called the soul of Auroville. Four zones – cultural, international, industrial and residential – were to radiate out from the Matrimandir to cover an area of 25 sq km, although as yet only 10 sq km has been realised.

In the words of the Mother, the founding vision of Auroville is that 'There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of goodwill, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world...'

a week is preferred and while work isn't obligatory, it's much appreciated. Accommodation isn't offered in exchange for work; rooms range from Rs 150 to 1000, and guests are also required to contribute Rs 60 per day for the 'maintenance and development' of Auroville.

There are more than 40 guesthouses in Auroville. The best way to find what you're looking for – that is, 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 Aurovilians gather at the Solar Kitchen – powered by solar energy – which dishes out more than 400 meals daily from its buffet. The café at the visitors centre is open to day visitors.

## Getting There & Away

The best way to enter Auroville is from the coast road, at the village of Periyar Mudaliarchavadi, near the turn-off to Repos Beach. Ask around as it's not well signposted. A return autorickshaw ride is about Rs 150, but a better option is to hire a moped or bicycle. It's about 12km from Puducherry to the visitors centre.

# CENTRAL TAMIL NADU

## CHIDAMBARAM

☎ 04144 / pop 67,942

Chidambaram's great temple complex of Nataraja, the dancing Shiva, is 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 **Natyanjali Dance Festival** attracts performers from all over the country to celebrate Nataraja – the Lord of Dances.

## Orientation & Information

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

**Cybase** (Pillaiyar Koil St; ☎ 9am-9pm) Fast internet access.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (Hotel Saradharam & South Car St)

**Post office** (North Car St; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Sat)

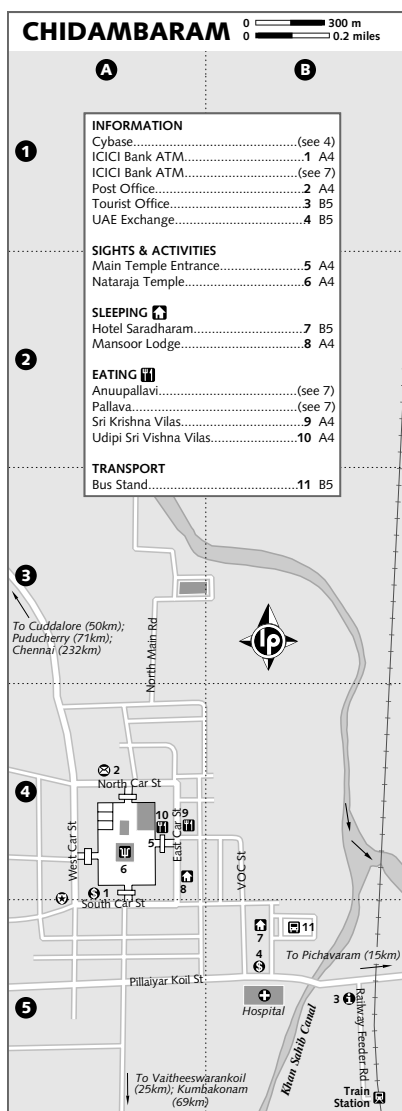
**Tourist office** (☎ 238739; Railway Feeder Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) You may be able to pick up a brochure but the office is frequently deserted.

**UAE Exchange** (Pillaiyar Koil St; ☎ Mon-Sat) The only place in town to exchange money.

## Sights

### NATARAJA TEMPLE

Chidambaram's star attraction, this **Shiva temple** (☎ courtyard & shrines 6am-12.30pm & 4-10.30pm) draws a regular stream of pilgrims and visitors. The region was a Chola capital from 907 to 1310 and the Nataraja Temple was erected during the later time of the administration. The high-walled 22-hectare complex has four



towering *gopurams* with finely sculptured icons depicting Hindu myths. The temple is renowned for its prime examples of Chola artistry and has since been patronised by numerous dynasties. The main temple entrance is at the east *gopuram*, off East Car St.

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 of that is the **Sivaganga** (Temple Tank) – guides will explain the stories from paintings and sculptures that surround it. In the southeast of the complex is an impressive statue of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh.

Directly opposite the main entrance a large statue of Shiva's escort, Nandi, looks towards the hall leading to the inner sanctum. Although non-Hindus are officially not allowed inside the gold-roofed inner sanctum itself, it's possible to walk down the corridor and observe rituals such as the fire ceremony (usually held before the afternoon and evening closing), where worshippers light goblets of fire and bells clang. Afternoon *puja* at around 5pm is also worth seeing.

Brahmin priests will usually take you in for a fee (anywhere from Rs 30 up to 300, depending on the language skills and knowledge of the guide) and guide you 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.

**Hotel Saradharam** (☎ 221336; www.hotelsaradharam.co.in; 19 VGP St; d without/with AC Rs 500/800; 🏠) The busy and friendly Hotel Saradharam is the top hotel in town and is conveniently located across from the bus stand. It's starting to look its age, though.

If you're on a budget and need to stay here overnight, possibly the best of the pilgrims' lodges is **Mansoor Lodge** (☎ 221072; 91 East Car St; s/d Rs 150/200), close to the temple with clean, good-value rooms.

Predictably, the best places to eat are in hotels. **Anuupallavi** (mains Rs 25-70; 🍴 lunch & dinner) is an excellent AC multicuisine restaurant; in the same hotel is a veg restaurant, **Pallava** (🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner). Near the temple entrance, **Udipi Sri Vishna Vilas** (thalis Rs 25; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a busy, clean place for South Indian veg food and thalis, as is Sri Krishna Vilas across the road.

## Getting There & Away

The bus stand is very central – within walking distance to the temple and accommodation.



There are hourly buses to Chennai; bus 157 (Rs 75, seven hours) is the quickest. Pudukcherry (Rs 21, two hours) and Kumbakonam (Rs 22, 2½ hours) buses run regularly. There are also direct buses to Madurai (Rs 120, eight hours, five daily).

Chidambaram is on a metre gauge rail line rather than a main line but the train is useful for getting to Kumbakonam, where you can change trains for Thanjavur or Trichy. There's one daily express train to Kumbakonam (2nd class/sleeper Rs 31/49, two hours) and several passenger trains. The station is a 20-minute walk southeast of the temple (Rs 30 by auto-rickshaw).

## AROUND CHIDAMBARAM

About 15km east of town, **Pichavaram** is an area of tidal canals and backwaters, fringed by mangroves. You can spend a pleasant hour or two being rowed around the waterways and enjoying the bird life and calm surrounds. Boat hire (per hour Rs 125; maximum five people) is available every day, and is busy with local visitors at the weekend. A basic three-room **guesthouse** (per room Rs 265) is avail-

able beside the boat-hire place, and you can order food there.

## KUMBAKONAM

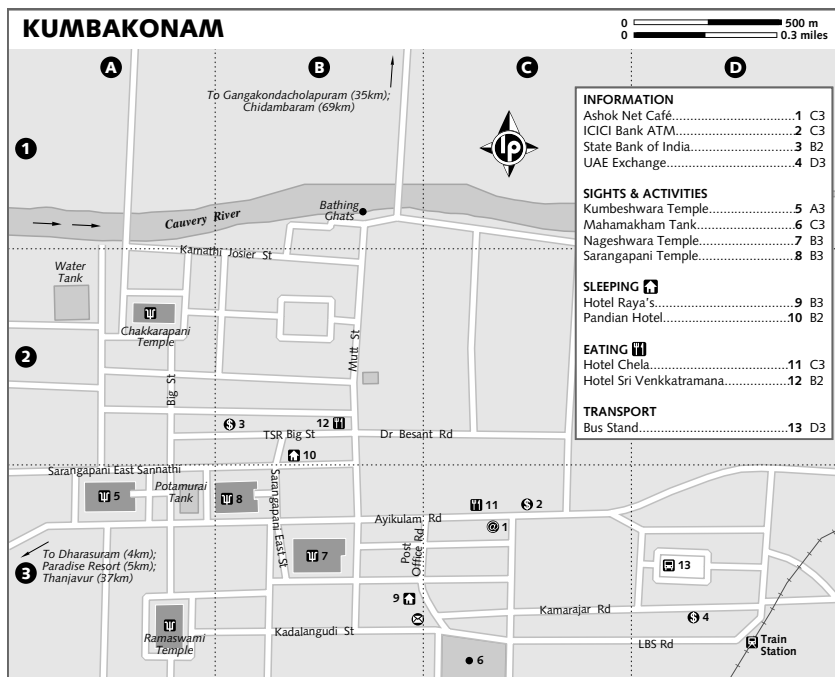
☎ 0435 / pop 160,877

Kumbakonam is a busy, dusty commercial centre, nestled along the Cauvery River some 37km northeast of Thanjavur. Here you can visit the many superb Chola temples scattered around town, or head east to the coastal towns of the Cauvery Delta. It's also an easy day trip from Thanjavur.

There's no tourist office in Kumbakonam, and road names and signs here are more erratic than usual. The best place to exchange travellers cheques is at the **UAE Exchange** (☎ 2423212; 134 Kamarajar Rd) near the train station. You'll find an ICICI Bank ATM almost opposite **Ashok Net Café** (☎ 2433054; 24 Ayikulam Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-10.30pm).

## Sights

Dozens of colourfully painted *gopurams* point skyward from Kumbakonam's 18 temples, most 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 **Sarangapani 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 **Mahamakhham Tank**, 600m south-east 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

Kumbakonam's hotels and restaurants are nothing to write home about but there are plenty to choose from, especially along Ayikulam Rd and the busy bazaar, TSR Big St.

**Pandian Hotel** (☎ 2430397; hotelrayas@yahoo.co.in; 52 Sarangapani East St; s/d Rs 140/200) This budget hotel is popular; rooms are standard issue with mildewed walls but the bathrooms are astonishingly clean.

**Hotel Raya's** (☎ 2422545; 18 Post Office Rd; d without/with AC from Rs 500/850; 🍷) With pictures of deities hanging everywhere, Raya's gets you in the mood for some temple hopping. Its rooms are not luxurious but it's clean and comfortable and it's the best of the midrange places.

**Paradise Resort** (☎ 2416469; www.paradiseresortindia.com; Tanjore Rd Darasuram; s/d Rs 1750/1950; 🍷) An atmospheric resort constructed around heritage buildings, the rooms here have cool tiles and verandas overlooking quiet and spacious gardens. A swimming pool is planned.

**Hotel Sri Venkkatramana** (TSR Big Rd; thalis Rs 25; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves good fresh veg food and it's very popular with locals. At **Hotel Chela** (9 Ayikulam Rd; mains Rs 30-80; 🍷 lunch & dinner) there's a decent North Indian restaurant serving tandoori chicken (Rs 80).

## BUSES FROM KUMBAKONAM

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Chennai (No 303)	118	7	every 30min
Chidambaram	31	2½	every 20min
Coimbatore	110	10	1 daily (7pm)
Madurai	65	5	8 daily
Puducherry	40	4½	every 20min
Thanjavur	14.50	1½	every 10min

## Getting There & Away

The bus stand and train station are about 2km east of the town centre. For details of bus services, see above.

For the Cauvery Delta area there are buses running every half-hour to Karaikal (Rs 16, two hours), via Tranquebar and then on to Nagapattinam.

The overnight **Rock Fort Express** is the only major train to/from Chennai (sleeper/3AC Rs 130/365), going via Thanjavur and Trichy. Passenger trains run to Chidambaram (Rs 31, two hours) and Thanjavur.

## AROUND KUMBAKONAM

Not far from Kumbakonam are two superb Chola temples at Dharasuram and Gangakon-dacholapuram. Comparatively few visitors go to these temples, and you can often appreciate their beauty in peace. Both can be visited on a day trip from Kumbakonam, or from Thanjavur (for Dharasuram) and Chidambaram (for Gangakon-dacholapuram).

### Dharasuram

Only 4km west of Kumbakonam in the village of Dharasuram, the **Airatesvara Temple** (🕒 6am-noon & 4-8pm), constructed by Raja Raja II (1146-63), is a superb example of 12th-century Chola architecture.

The temple is fronted by columns with unique miniature sculptures. In the 14th century, the row of large statues around the temple was replaced with brick and concrete statues similar to those found at the Thanjavur Temple. Many were removed to the art gallery in the raja's palace at Thanjavur, but they have since been returned to Dharasuram. The remarkable sculptures depict, among other things, Shiva as Kankalamurti – the mendicant. Stories from the epics are also depicted. At the main shrine, a huge decorated lingam

stands, the natural light illuminating it from dawn to dusk.

You can get to Dharasuram by bus (Rs 5) or autorickshaw (Rs 60 return, including waiting time).

### Gangakondacholapuram

This **Brihadishwara Temple** (☎ 6am-noon & 4-8pm), 35km north of Kumbakonam, was built by the Chola emperor Rajendra I (1012-44) in the style of the temple at Thanjavur, built by his father. Later additions were made in the 15th century by the Nayaks. The ornate tower is almost 55m high and weighs 80 tonnes. Within the recesses of the temple walls stand many beautiful statues, including those of Ganesh, Nataraja and Harihara.

Buses go from Kumbakonam bus stand to the temple every half-hour (Rs 11, 1½ hours); early morning is the quietest time to visit.

### CAUVERY DELTA

The Cauvery River rises in the Western Ghats and flows eastwards before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. Its delta is a fertile farming area and there are a number of coastal towns of interest.

The Nagapattinam district here was the worst affected part of Tamil Nadu when the 2004 tsunami struck, with up to 7000 lives lost and thousands more left homeless. In 2006 damage was still evident all along the coast, and there were the many local and international aid agencies working in the area.

### Tranquebar (Tharangambadi)

About 80km south of Chidambaram, Tranquebar was a Danish post, established in 1620. The solid, pink-hued seafort **Danesborg Fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/50; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5.45pm, closed Fri), occupied by the British in 1801, houses a small but fascinating **museum** on the region's Danish history. The quiet roadway leading to the fort is entered by an impressive 1792 gateway, and an exuberant Sunday service is held in the nearby 1718 church.

Stay directly opposite the fort in the exquisitely comfortable heritage **Bungalow on the Beach** (☎ 04364-288065; www.neemranahotels.com; r from Rs 4000; ☎); the pool was still under construction when we visited, but the rooms and views were fabulous. Just next door – and still with sea views – is its budget option **Hotel Tamil Nadu** (☎ 04364-288065; www.neemranahotels.com; r Rs 600). To get there take a bus from Chidambaram (Rs 28, 2½ hours).

### Vailankanni (Velanganni)

☎ 04365 / pop 10,104

Vailankanni is the site of the Roman Catholic **Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health** and its associated sacred sites. Thousands of Christian pilgrims file through the impressive white neogothic structure, which was elevated to the status of basilica in 1962 during the Pope's visit.

An annual nine-day festival culminates on 8 September, the celebration of Mary's birth, and the weeks running up to it see many thousands of pilgrims walking the 300km or so from Chennai and elsewhere; the days before and during the festival see the town packed to bursting. There's a hectically devout but amiable atmosphere, with many interested Hindu visitors. Tragically, many pilgrims were here for Christmas when the 2004 tsunami struck. At least 2000 people were killed and 120 shops leading down to the beach were washed away. The church itself was untouched.

In town there are many lodges, especially in the square by the bus station and around the basilica. **VJ Lodge** (☎ 263861; r without/with AC Rs 250/500; ☎) is a good, tatty and spotless option, or ask at the Church Rooms Booking Office, also on the square. Just out of town is **Bethesda Inn** (☎ 263336; Nagapattinam Main Rd; r Rs 1300; ☎), a quieter midrange option, with a garden swimming pool planned. Room rates everywhere double during the festival.

Daily bus services travel between Vailankanni and Chennai, Coimbatore, Bengaluru, Kanyakumari and Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum).

### Calimere (Kodikkarai) Wildlife & Bird Sanctuary

This 333-sq-km **sanctuary** (per person/vehicle Rs 5/15; ☎ 6am-6pm) of scrubby evergreen forest, salt pans and coast is 90km southeast of Thanjavur. Noted for its vast flocks of migratory waterfowl, Calimere's tidal mud flats and salt pans are home to teals, shovellers, curlews, terns, plovers, sandpipers, shanks, herons and more from October to March.

In the drier times of the year there are always bush birds to see, and resident black bucks, sambars and spotted deer on the plains. To get the most from your visit, you'll need at least a bicycle (negotiate with a local) and binoculars. If you have a vehicle, a local guide (not officially compulsory, but in fact

impossible to bypass; pay around Rs 50) will join you at the park entrance for an hour or so to make a 15km round trip through the sanctuary, pointing out wildlife and stopping at an 1890 lighthouse and watchtower on the shore.

There are two lodges run by the forest department. One is in the village at the end of the road, a big and very obvious (unsigned) building on the right. Rooms here are Rs 100 for two people, and you can get food at the basic stalls outside. A better option if you have a vehicle is **Thambusamy Rest House** (r Rs 100), 1km or so off the main road and beside the new lighthouse; you can walk to a watchtower and there's a shady, neglected garden. You'll need to bring food with you.

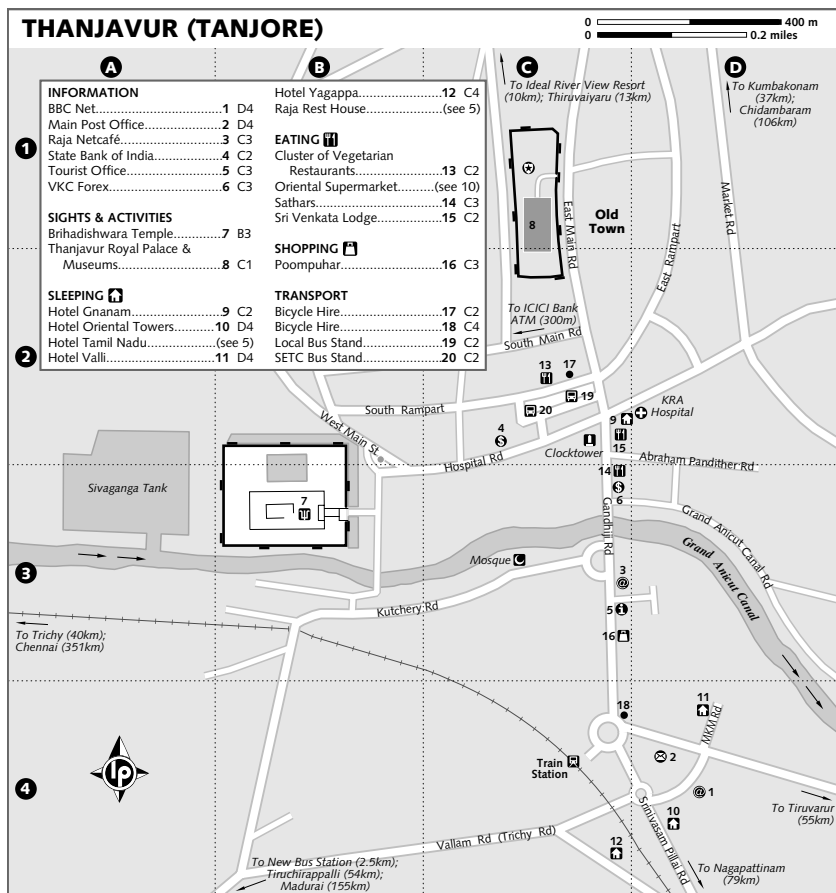
The easiest way to get to Calimere is by bus (Rs 6, every hour) or taxi from Vedaranniyam, which is 12km away and linked by frequent buses to Nagapattinam or Thanjavur.

## THANJAVUR (TANJORE)

☎ 04362 / pop 215,725

Dominated by the superb World Heritage-listed Brihadishwara Temple, and a sprawling Maratha Palace complex, Thanjavur is an easy-going town and a worthy detour off the Chennai–Madurai route.

The town is famous also for its distinctive art style, a combination of raised and painted surfaces. Krishna is the most popular deity depicted, and in the Thanjavur school his skin is white, rather than the traditional blue-black.



Thanjavur is set on a fertile delta and the accompanying harvests make the town a great place to be during Pongal (harvest) celebrations in January.

Thanjavur was the ancient capital of the Chola kings, whose origins go back to the beginning of the Christian era. The Cholas' era of empire building was between AD 850 and 1270; at the height of their power, they controlled most of the Indian peninsula. The stylised bronze work for which they were famous is still produced in town.

### Information

**BBC Net** (MKM Rd; per hr Rs 15; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm)

Fast internet access in the basement of the Nallaiyah Shopping Complex.

**ICICI Bank ATM** (South Main Rd & New Bus Station)

**Main post office** (☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Near the train station.

**Raja Netcafé** (☎ 2378175; 30 Gandhiji Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-11pm) Internet access.

**Tourist office** (☎ 230984; ☎ 10am-5.45pm 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.

### Sights

#### BRIHADISHWARA TEMPLE & FORT

Built by Raja Raja in 1010, the magnificent **Brihadishwara Temple** (☎ 6am-1pm & 3-8pm) is the crowning glory of Chola temple architecture and the highlight of Thanjavur. Known locally as the 'Big Temple', this fascinating monument is one of only a handful in India with World Heritage listing and is worth a couple of visits – preferably early morning and late afternoon, when the setting sun bathes the sandstone tower and walls in a syrupy glow.

Set in spacious, well-tended grounds, the temple has several pillared halls and shrines and 250 linga enshrined along the outer walls. Inscriptions record the names of dancers, musicians and poets – a reminder of the significance of this area to the development of the arts. A huge covered statue of the bull, Nandi – 6m long by 3m high – faces the inner sanctum. Created from a single piece of rock, it weighs 25 tonnes and is one of India's largest Nandi statues.

Unlike most South Indian temples where the *gopurams* are the highest towers, here it is the 13-storey *vimana* above the sanctum at 66m that reaches further into the sky. Its impressive gilded top is the original. The

sanctum contains a 4m-high lingam with a circumference of 7m.

To the right of the temple entrance the temple elephant is usually on hand to take a coin donation with its trunk.

#### THANJAVUR ROYAL PALACE & MUSEUMS

The decaying splendour of huge corridors, spacious halls, observation and arsenal towers and shady courtyards in this labyrinthine and atmospheric complex were constructed partly by the Nayaks of Madurai around 1550 and partly by the Marathas.

At the main entrance of the **palace** (foreign adult/child Rs 50/25, Indian Rs 5/2, incl entry to the Durbar Hall & bell tower; ☎ 9am-6pm), follow the signs to the magnificent **Durbar Hall** (Royal Court), one of two such halls where the king held audiences. It's unrestored but in reasonable condition, especially the murals at the eastern end beneath which you can see part of a 6km secret passage running under the palace.

In the former Sadar Mahal Palace is the **Raja Serfoji Memorial Hall** (admission Rs 2) with a small collection of thrones, weapons and photographs. The **Royal Palace Museum** (admission Rs 1, camera/video Rs 30/250) shows off an eclectic collection of regal memorabilia, including wonderful embroidered shoes and hats, most of it dating from the early 19th century when the enlightened and far-sighted Serfoji II ruled. His sixth descendant still lives here; pick up *Raja Serfoji II* (Rs 25), his very readable monograph about his extraordinary ancestor, from any of the ticket desks.

The **art gallery** (admission Rs 15, camera/video Rs 30/250), between the Royal Palace Museum and the bell tower, has a superb collection of detailed Chola bronze statues from the 9th to 18th centuries in the smaller durbar hall. Nearby, the **bell tower** is worth the climb for the views right across Thanjavur and over the palace itself. The spiral stone staircase is dark, narrow and slippery; and watch your head!

The **Saraswati Mahal Library** is between the gallery and the palace museum. Established around 1700, its collection includes more than 30,000 palm-leaf and paper manuscripts in Indian and European languages. The library is closed to the public but you can visit the interesting **museum** (admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 1.30-5.30pm Tue-Thu), where exhibits range from the Ramayana written on palm leaf, to exquisite miniatures, to explicit prints of Chinese torture methods in 1804.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

There's a bunch of nondescript cheap lodges opposite the central bus stand with rooms for around Rs 150 a double.

**Raja Rest House** (s/d Rs 100/150) Once you get past the dilapidated and mildewed state of this building it's clean enough for the price, and very central, behind Hotel Tamil Nadu. Smiling staff are not included here.

**Hotel Valli** (☎ 231580; arasu\_tnj@rediffmail.com; 2948 MKM Rd; s/d from Rs 185/240, r with AC Rs 600; 🚽) Near the train station, Valli is the best bet for budget travellers. The rooms are clean and the staff friendly and helpful. It's in a reasonably peaceful location beyond the greasy backyard workshops.

**Hotel Yagappa** (☎ 230421; 1 Vallam Rd; d without AC Rs 195-400, with AC Rs 700; 🚽) Just off Trichy Rd and near the station, Yagappa is a big place with a variety of rooms and a half-decent garden with requisite restaurant. The more expensive doubles are spacious with some unusual furnishings.

**Hotel Tamil Nadu** (☎ 231325; Gandhiji Rd; d without AC from Rs 275/550; 🚽) Although this is a former raja's guesthouse, set in a quiet, leafy courtyard with huge rooms and wide balconies, that's where the royal treatment ends. It's full of character, but some of the rooms look like they haven't been cleaned since the Raj era and the staff give the impression they want to be somewhere else.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Gnanam** (☎ 278501; www.hotelgnanam.com; Market Rd; s/d Rs 800/900; 🚽 📺) Clean as a pin and busy with well-to-do locals, this central hotel with two good restaurants is great value.

**Hotel Oriental Towers** (☎ 230724; www.hotelorientaltowers.com; 2889 Srinivasam Pillai Rd; s/d from Rs 1100/1300; 🚽 📺 📺) With a business centre, gym, sauna, spa, massage and 4th-floor swimming pool (Rs 100 for nonguests), this is a business hotel around the corner from the train station. Ask for the rooms with temple view; they're a good size and comfortable. Service is willing and there are a couple of restaurants and a bar.

**Ideal River View Resort** (☎ 250633; www.idealresort.com; s/d Rs 1600/2200; 🚽 📺 📺) Although 10km northwest of the city, this tranquil resort is by far the nicest place to stay near Thanjavur. Set in beautiful gardens beside the Vennar River are immaculate, brightly furnished cot-

tages with roomy balconies. There's a good open-air restaurant beside the river, a great pool, an Ayurvedic centre, and yoga classes on request. In busy season a shuttle runs into Thanjavur at 10am (returning at 4.30pm) and you can call ahead for a free pick-up.

## Eating

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

**Sathars** (☎ 331041; 167 Gandhiji Rd; mains Rs 35-85) Good service and quality food make this place popular. Downstairs is a veg restaurant with lunchtime thalis, upstairs is an AC section with great-value nonveg food – whole tandoori chicken for Rs 85 or prawn masala Rs 50.

Nearby to Sathars is the veg-only **Sri Venkata Lodge** (Gandhiji Rd; thalis Rs 25). For self-caterers, the excellent **Oriental Supermarket** (🕒 9am-9pm), below Hotel Oriental Towers, stocks a bit of everything.

## Shopping

Thanjavur is a good place to shop for handicrafts and arts, especially around the palace area. Numerous shops along East Main Rd and Gandhiji Rd sell everything from quality crafts and ready-made clothes to inexpensive kitsch. For fixed prices and hassle-free shopping, **Poompuhar** (Gandhiji Rd; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) is good for leatherwork, carvings, jewellery and other crafts.

To see bronze-casters at work, call craftsman **Mr Kathirvel** (☎ 098432-35202), whose extended family have, for several generations, used the lost-wax method to make bronze artefacts in a backyard kiln; it's a window into the small cottage industries on which Indian craft still thrives. He lives out towards Trichy Rd; call for directions.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The two city bus stands are for local and SETC buses. SETC has a computerised **reservation office** (☎ 230950; 🕒 7.30am-9.30pm). The New Bus Station, 2.5km south of the centre, services local areas and destinations south. Bus 74 shuttles between the three bus stations (Rs 3.50). For details of services, see opposite.

### TRAIN

The station is conveniently central at the south end of Gandhiji Rd. Thanjavur is off



**BUSES FROM THANJAVUR (TANJORE)**

Destination	Fare	Duration (Rs)	Frequency (hr)
Chennai	105-135	8	20 daily
Chidambaram*	50	4	every 30min
Kumbakonam*	15	1	every 30min
Madurai*	50	4	every 15min
Ooty	125	10	8.30pm only
Tirupathi	147	11	8pm only
Trichy*	20	1½	every 5min

\* New Bus Station

the main Chennai–Madurai line, so there's only one express train direct to Chennai – the overnight *Rock Fort Express* (sleeper/3AC Rs 181/485, 9½ hours) departing at 8.30pm. For more frequent trains north or south, including to Madurai, take a passenger train to Trichy (Rs 12, 1½ hours, eight daily) and change there. There's one daily express (6.50am) and a couple of passenger trains to Kumbakonam (Rs 10, one hour).

The *Thanjavur-Mysore Express* leaves daily at 7.15pm for Bengaluru (sleeper/3AC Rs 205/493, 11 hours) and Mysore (sleeper/3AC Rs 220/598, 14½ hours).

**Getting Around**

The main attractions of Thanjavur are close enough to walk between, but it can make for a long tiring day. Autorickshaws will take you on a tour of the temple and palace for around Rs 50 or hire a local taxi (non-AC/AC per half-day Rs 500/700). Both will want to get you into the craft emporiums. Bicycles can be hired from stalls opposite the train station and local bus stand (per hour Rs 3).

An autorickshaw into town from the New Bus Station costs around Rs 150.

**AROUND THANJAVUR**

About 13km north of Thanjavur, **Thiruvaiyaru** hosts the January **international music festival** in honour of the saint and composer Thyagaraja, whose birthplace is at Tiruvarur, 55km east of Thanjavur. The **Thyagararajaswami Temple** here boasts the largest temple chariot in Tamil Nadu, which is hauled through the streets during the 10-day **car festival** in April/May. Regular buses run from Thanjavur to Thiruvaiyaru for Rs 4.

**TRICHY (TIRUCHIRAPPALLI)**

☎ 0431 / pop 847,131

Tiruchirappalli, universally known as Trichy, is a sprawling but extremely enjoyable city with two extraordinary temples – one perched high above the town on a rocky mount – and many travellers find Trichy more enjoyable than the clamour of the more renowned Madurai. It's a well-serviced regional transport centre, always busy with locals especially during auspicious marriage seasons when gorgeously clothed families abound in every hotel.

Trichy's long history dates back to before the Christian era when it was a Chola citadel. During the 1st millennium AD, both the Pallavas and Pandyas took power many times before the Cholas regained control in the 10th century. When the Chola empire finally decayed, Trichy came into the realm of the Vijayanagar emperors of Hampi until their defeat in 1565 by the forces of the Deccan sultans. The town and its most famous landmark, the Rock Fort Temple, were built by the Nayaks of Madurai.

**Orientation**

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, tourist office and main post office, all conveniently within walking distance of each other. This is where you'll likely arrive and most likely stay. The Rock Fort Temple and main bazaar area is 2.5km north of here; and the other important temples are a further 3km to 5km north again, across the Cauvery River. Fortunately, the whole lot is connected by an excellent bus service.

**Information****INTERNET ACCESS**

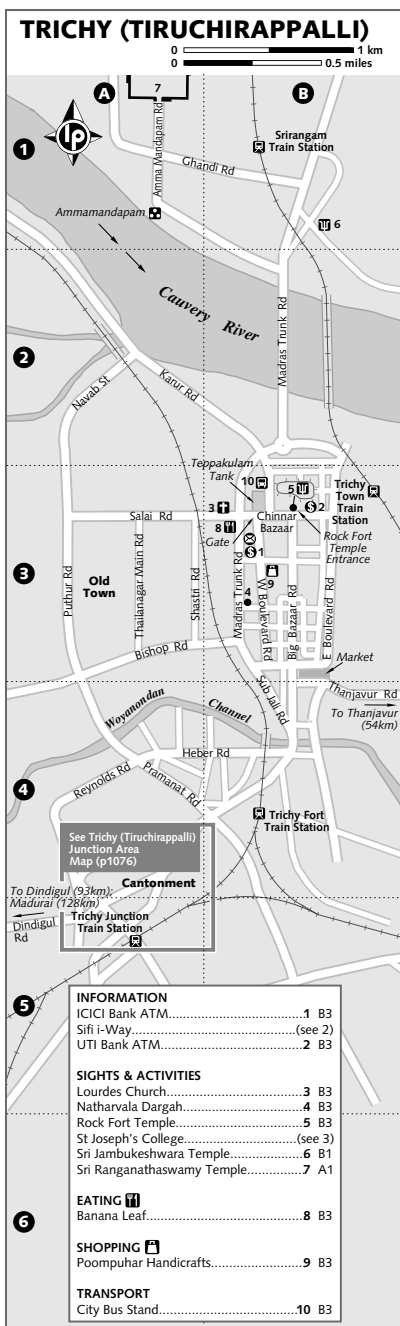
**Sify i-way** (per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am–9pm) Chinnar Bazaar (Map p1074); McDonald's Rd (Map p1076); Williams Rd (Map p1076)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Seahorse Hospital** (Map p1076; ☎ 2462660; Royal Rd) A large hospital in the Cantonment.

**MONEY**

**Delight Forex** (Map p1076; ☎ 9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Sat)  
**ICICI ATM** (Map p1076; Junction Rd) In front of the train station.



**ICICI Bank ATM** (Map p1074; West Boulevard Rd)

**IDBI Bank ATM** (Map p1076; Dindigul Rd)

**UTI Bank ATM** (Map p1074; Chinnar Bazaar) Near the Rock Fort Temple entrance.

**UTI Bank ATM** (Map p1076; Junction Rd)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (Map p1076; ☎ 2460136; 1 Williams Rd; 🕒 10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Has brochures for various Tamil Nadu locations.

## TRAVEL AGENT

**Indian Panorama** (☎ 2433372; www.indianpanorama.in) Trichy-based and covering all of India, this professional and reliable agency/tour operator is run by an Australian-Indian couple.

## Sights

### ROCK FORT TEMPLE

The spectacular **Rock Fort Temple** (Map p1074; admission Rs 1.50, camera/video Rs 10/50; 🕒 6am-8pm) is perched 83m high on a massive rocky outcrop. Here, it's not so much the temple itself as the setting and joining the pilgrimage to the top that make it special. This smooth rock was first hewn by the Pallavas who cut small cave temples into the southern face, but it was the Nayaks who later made use of its naturally fortified position. There are two main temples: **Sri Thayumanaswamy Temple**, halfway to the top (check out the bats snoozing in the stairwell roof near here!), and **Vinayaka Temple**, at the summit, which is dedicated to Ganesh. It's a stiff climb up the 437 stone-cut steps, but worth the effort – the view is wonderful, with eagles wheeling beneath you. Non-Hindus are not allowed into either temple, but occasionally – for a small fee – temple priests waive this regulation, particularly at the summit temple.

### SRI RANGANATHASWAMY TEMPLE

The superb **Sri Ranganathaswamy temple complex** (Map p1074; camera/video Rs 50/150; 🕒 6am-1pm & 3-9pm), about 3km north of the Rock Fort, is dedicated to Vishnu. Although mentioned in the *sangam* poetry of the early academy of Tamil poets, temple inscriptions date its existence from the 10th century. With the Vijayanagar victory the temple was restored to the structure that exists today. Many dynasties have had a hand in its construction, including the Cheras, Pandyas, Cholas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagars and Nayaks – and work continues. The largest *gopuram*, the main entrance, was completed in 1987, and now measures 73m.

At 60 hectares, the complex with its seven concentric walled sections and 21 *gopurams* is possibly the largest in India. The scale of the buildings along the outermost walls retains a sense of the original tradition of poor people and beggars at the first wall, Chettiar traders and financiers at the second, then Brahmans at the third. Inside the fourth wall is a kiosk where you can buy a ticket (Rs 10) and climb the wall for a panoramic view of sorts of the entire complex. Non-Hindus may go to the sixth wall but are not allowed into the gold-topped sanctum. Guides and priests ask high fees to show you around this temple – at least Rs 200 an hour. About half that is reasonable; agree on a fee beforehand.

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

Much smaller and often overlooked, the nearby **Sri Jambukeshwara Temple** (Map p1074; camera/video Rs 20/150; ☎ 6am-1pm & 3-9pm) is an oasis of calm and serenity after the clamour of Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple. It was built around the same time, and is dedicated to Shiva and Parvati. Being one of the five temples honouring the elements – in this case, water – the temple is built around a partly immersed Shiva lingam. Non-Hindus may not enter the sanctum, but beyond the second wall is an interesting chamber lined with linga and statues of gods.

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

### OTHER SIGHTS

Completed in 1896, the soaring, bone-white **Lourdes Church** (Map p1074) is opposite the Teppakkulam Tank. Modelled on the neogothic basilica in Lourdes, France, it was renovated in January 1998 and an annual procession, the **Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes**, is held on 11 February. Its entrance is on Madras Trunk Rd, through the calm green gardens of **St Joseph's College** where 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.

**Natharvala Dargah** (Map p1074), the tomb of the popular Muslim saint, Nathher, is an impressive building with a 20m-high dome with pinnacles. It's a popular pilgrimage site.

Built in 1812, **St John's Church** (Map p1076) in the junction area has louvred side doors that open to turn the church into an airy pavilion.

### Sleeping

Most of Trichy's accommodation is in the Junction-Cantonment area around the bus station and a short walk north of the train station.

### BUDGET

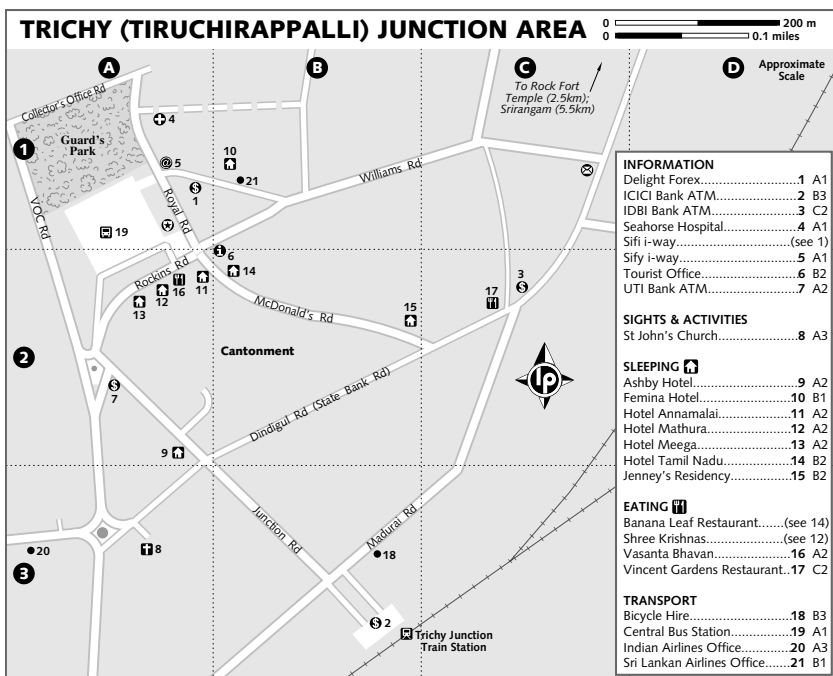
**Hotel Tamil Nadu** (Map p1076; ☎ 2414346; McDonald's Rd; d without/with AC Rs 300/500; ☎) A decent enough government-run hotel, on a quiet street, with good restaurant attached. It's always busy; book ahead if you can.

**Hotel Meega** (Map p1076; ☎ 2414092; hotelmeega@rediffmail.com; 3 Rockins Rd; d without/with AC Rs 325/500; ☎) This is a good-value hotel – the rooms are smallish but clean, bright and more midrange than budget standard. There's a popular veg restaurant downstairs.

**Ashby Hotel** (Map p1076; ☎ 2460652; www.ashbyhotel.com; 17A Junction Rd; d without/with AC from Rs 425/850; ☎) Although it looks a bit worse for wear from the outside, Ashby's Raj-era, old-world atmosphere – with non-AC rooms opening out onto a leafy courtyard garden – is full of character. Rooms are spacious (though the AC rooms at the back are very uninteresting), and there's a bar and garden restaurant. Be prepared to contend with somewhat overbearing staff.

**Hotel Mathura** (Map p1076; ☎ 2414737; www.hotelmathura.com; 1 Rockins Rd; s without/with AC 325/595, d Rs 415/685; ☎) Right next door to Hotel Meega, Mathura is another good choice. The rooms are clean and comfortable with thick foam mattresses but be sure to ask for a quiet room towards the back. There's a busy restaurant at the front and credit cards are accepted.

**Hotel Annamalai** (Map p1076; ☎ 2412880; hotelanna malai@yahoo.com; McDonald's Rd; d without/with AC Rs 550/800; ☎) Despite its decidedly insalubrious reception area, the staff is friendly and rooms on this comparatively quiet side street are big, clean and comfortable with decent bathrooms.



## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Femina Hotel** (Map p1076; ☎ 2414501; try\_femina@sancharnet.in; 109 Williams Rd; d without/with AC from Rs 550/1300; 🍽️ 🚿) Femina is one of those Indian business hotels that manages to be affordable even if you're on a budget – and the staff doesn't look at travellers as if they've just crawled out of a swamp. There's a small shopping arcade, 24-hour coffee shop and a couple of very good restaurants. Nonguests can use the pool and small gym (per hour Rs 75).

**Jenney's Residency** (Map p1076; ☎ 2414414; www.jenneysresidency.com; McDonald's Rd; s/d from US\$30/40; 🍽️ 🚿) Jenney's is enormous, semiluxurious and in a relatively quiet location. The best rooms are on the top floors but all are well appointed; be aware that a 25% luxury tax will be added. Hotel facilities include shops, a health club and a truly bizarre Wild West theme bar.

## Eating

Most hotels have their share of good restaurants – such as the multicuisine Madras Restaurant at Jenney's Residency (above) – and most have bars.

**Shree Krishnas** (Map p1076; Rockins Rd; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant in front of Hotel Mathura has a popular veg section serving topnotch thalis (Rs 20) – it's always packed at lunchtime. There's a little veranda and snack bar at the front from where you can watch the bustle of the bus stand across the road.

**Vasanta Bhavan** (Map p1076; Rockins Rd; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Next door to Shree Krishnas, good veg North Indian food such as *paneer tikka masala* (spicy curd cheese, Rs 30) with naan (flat bread; Rs 12) is a tasty option.

**Banana Leaf** (Map p1074; ☎ 271101; Madras Trunk Rd; mains Rs 20-75; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) One of the few good choices close to the Rock Fort Temple, this is an intimate little place with a big menu of inexpensive Indian and Chinese dishes – tandoori chicken (Rs 70), crab masala (Rs 45) and the intriguing rabbit masala (Rs 70). It's rustic rather than gourmet, but the food and service are fine. Another branch is next to the Hotel Tamil Nadu in the Trichy Junction area.

**Vincent Gardens Restaurant** (Map p1076; Dindigul Rd; mains Rs 30-70; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) There's a pleasant outdoor setting, and the limited veg and

nonveg menu is done well. Take mosquito repellent in the evening.

## Shopping

Trichy's best shopping is in the bazaar area south of the Rock Fort Temple (Map p1074). Wandering along Big Bazaar Rd and Chinnar Bazaar in the evening is a fabulous assault on the senses – these areas are constantly packed with people and, from tiny stalls to flashy department stores, lit up like Times Square on New Year's Eve.

**Poompuhar Handicrafts** (Map p1074; West Boulevard Rd; ☎ 9am-8pm) For fixed-price crafts, check out this place.

## 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 flights to Sri Lanka. **Indian Airlines** (Map p1076; ☎ 2341063; 4A Dindigul Rd) flies four days a week to Chennai (US\$120). Air Deccan also flies daily to Chennai.

**Sri Lankan Airlines** (Map p1076; ☎ 2462381; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), at Femina Hotel, flies daily to Colombo (Rs 3800).

### BUS

Most buses head to the central bus station on Rockins Rd. If you're travelling to Kodaikanal, a good option is to take one of the frequent buses to Dindigul (Rs 25, two hours) and change there. For details of services, see the table, right.

### TRAIN

Trichy is on the main Chennai–Madurai line so there are lots of rail options in either direction. Of the nine daily expresses to Chennai, the quickest are the *Vaigai Express* (2nd/class Rs 85/297, 5½ hours) departing Trichy at 9.10am, and the *Pallavan Express*, which leaves at 6.30am. The best overnight train is the *Rock Fort Express* (sleeper/3AC Rs 136/382, 7½ hours) at 9.40pm.

For Madurai the best train is the *Guruvaya Express* (2nd class/sleeper Rs 47/75, three hours), which leaves at 1pm. The *Mysore Express* goes daily to Bengaluru (sleeper/3AC Rs 160/450, 11½ hours) and Mysore (sleeper/3AC Rs 200/562, 15 hours).

## BUSES FROM TRICHY (TIRUCHIRAPPALLI)

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	150	8	3 daily
Chennai	110-142	7	every 5min
Chidambaram	51	3½	hourly
Coimbatore	73	7	every 30min
Kodaikanal	62	6	3 daily
Madurai	35	3	every 10min
Ooty	100	8	1 daily
Puducherry	70	5	3 daily
Thanjavur	15	1½	every 5min
Tirupathi	144	9	5 daily

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The 7km ride into town is Rs 1250 by taxi and Rs 60 by autorickshaw. 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 (Map p1076) near the train station where you can hire bicycles (per hr Rs 5).

### BUS

Trichy's local bus service is mercifully efficient and easy to use. Bus 1 (A or B) from the main bus station on Rockins Rd goes every few minutes via the Rock Fort Temple, Sri Jambukeshwara Temple and the main entrance to Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple (Rs 4). 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

Several little-visited historical and cultural gems in this area combine to make a great road trip to Rameswaram, or a day tour from either Trichy or Madurai.

Much of the property of this former princely state (1640–1948) is on display in the won-

derful **Pudukkottai Museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 3/100; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), located in a renovated palace building in Pudukkottai town. It's an eclectic collection, including musical instruments and megalithic burial artefacts, textiles and jewellery, some remarkable paintings and miniatures and much more! There are decent English-language signs, too.

Simple and imposing, the renovated **Tirumayam Fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am-5pm) is worth a climb to the top for 360-degree views of the landscape and the old town walls, and a shady rest with the goats under a banyan tree.

Nothing can adequately prepare visitors for the extraordinary residences of the Chettiers, historically a group of canny businesspeople, bankers and traders from the area of Chettinad. More palaces than houses, these vast constructions of red-tiled roofs, stained glass, carved Burmese teak, sculpted granite and opulent Italian marble – often painted rainbow candy-colours – are stunning. The heritage township of **Kanadukathan**, off a dusty road with no hint of the wonders ahead, is the place to stop and wander. Some houses welcome visitors to potter through the courtyards and public rooms if the family is not in residence or, to experience life in such a place, the 126-room **Chettinadu Mansion** (☎ 04565-273080; www.chettinadmansion.com; r Rs 3300), built between 1902 and 1912, has opened seven fabulous guest rooms. Cheaper accommodation is available 12km away in Karaikkudi; **Hotel Udhayam** (☎ 04565-237440; r without/with AC Rs 195/770; 🍽️) is a decent option.

It's an easy day tour from either Trichy (taxi without/with AC Rs 1000/1500) or Madurai (a little more). Otherwise catch one of the many daily buses from Trichy to Karaikkudi (Rs 52, three hours) and get on and off at the sights along the way. Coming from Madurai, get a bus to Karaikkudi and then 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 38,035

Rameswaram is one of the most significant pilgrimage centres in South India for both Shaivites and Vaishnavites. It was here that Rama (an incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the Ramayana) offered thanks to Shiva. At the town's core is the Ramanathaswamy Temple, one of the most important temples in India,

and here you'll see a representation of India in miniature, with pilgrims including everyone from urbane sophisticates to colourfully clad Rajasthani tribespeople.

Rameswaram is on an island in the Gulf of Mannar, and is connected to the mainland at Mandapam by one of India's great engineering wonders, the Indira Gandhi bridge, which was opened in 1988. The town was once an important ferry port linking India and Sri Lanka, but the service ceased when things got ugly in Sri Lanka. At the time of writing it shows no signs of resuming, though regular boatloads of Tamil refugees do manage to make the crossing.

Apart from a regular influx of pilgrims, Rameswaram is a sleepy fishing village with a pleasantly laid-back atmosphere and the pungent smell of drying fish hanging in the air – take a stroll down to the harbour in the early morning to see the fishing boats come in and the catch being sorted.

## Orientation & Information

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.

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

## Sights

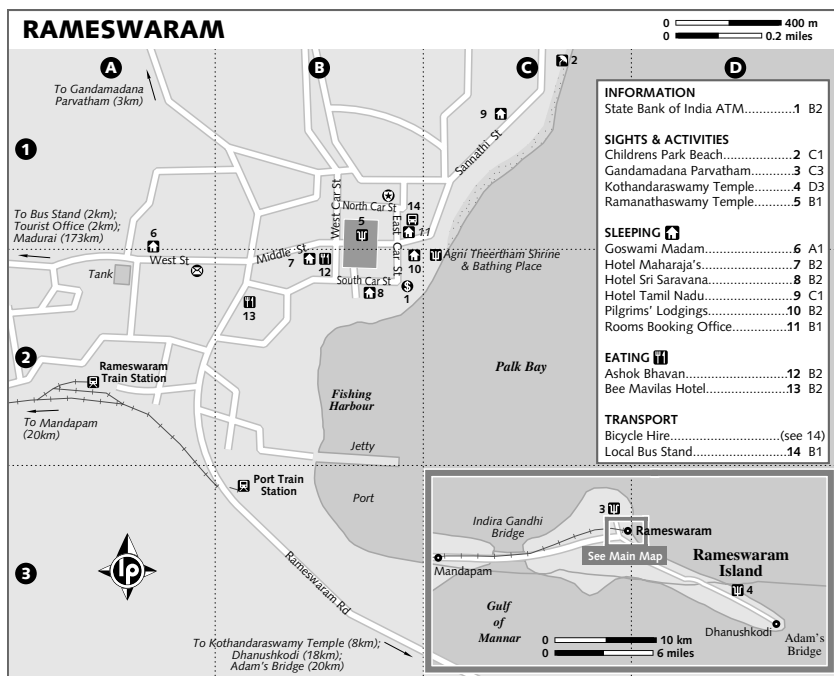
### RAMANATHASWAMY TEMPLE

A fine example of late Dravidian architecture, this **temple** (camera Rs 25; ☎ 4am-1pm & 3-8.30pm) is most renowned for its four magnificent corridors lined with elaborately sculpted pillars. Construction began in the 12th century AD and later additions included a 53m-high *gopuram*. The 22 *theerthams* (tanks) within the complex are believed by devotees to have particular powers and pilgrims are expected to bathe in, and drink from the waters in each *theertham*. The number of *theerthams* is said to correspond with the number of arrows in Rama's quiver, which he used to generate water on the island. Only Hindus may enter the inner sanctum, which is adorned with paintings depicting the origins of Rameswaram.

Even when the temple is closed, it is possible to take a peaceful amble through the extensive corridors.

### DHANUSHKODI & ADAM'S BRIDGE





About 18km southeast of town, **Dhanushkodi** is a long, windswept surf beach and sandpit with an end-of-the-world feel. Other than the beach and some straggling fishing shanties, there's not much here, but it's a pleasant walk to the end of the peninsula where you can gaze out at **Adam's Bridge**, the chain of reefs, sandbanks and islets that almost connects Sri Lanka with India, 33km away. Legend says that these are the stepping stones created by Rama to follow Ravana, in his bid to rescue Sita in the epic Ramayana. Buses (Rs 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. Otherwise, an autorickshaw (45 minutes one way) costs Rs 250 return, including one hour waiting time.

About 10km before Dhanushkodi, the **Kothandaraswamy Temple** is the only structure to survive the 1964 cyclone that destroyed the village. Legend has it that Rama, overcome with guilt at having killed Ravana, performed a *puja* on this spot and thereafter the temple was built. It is also believed that Vibhishana, brother of Sita's kidnapper Ravana, surrendered to Rama here.

### GANDAMADANA PARVATHAM

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

To visit the temple, it's an easy and interesting bicycle ride through the backstreets of villages and past the humungous TV transmitter.

### Activities

At **Childrens Park Beach**, a shady stretch of relatively clean sand with a few swings and fishing boats, touts hang around offering a two-hour **snorkelling trip**. This amounts to a short paddle out in a canoe to a virtually nonexistent reef, but it's fun to go for a swim and you might see some fish. The going rate is about Rs 100 per person for two people.

### Festivals & Events

**Car Festival** (Feb/Mar) During the festival, a huge

decorated chariot with idols of the deities installed is hauled through the streets in a pulsating parade.

**Thiru Kalyana** (Jul/Aug) This festival celebrates the celestial marriage of Shiva and Parvati.

### Sleeping & Eating

Hotels, mainly geared towards pilgrims, are often booked out during festivals. Don't come here expecting anything resembling luxury – there are no upmarket hotels and at the budget end the choices are a bit grim. Near the temple, music blasts out from 4.30am and for most of the day.

The cheapest places to stay are the pilgrims' lodgings run by the temple, where basic double rooms are Rs 100 to 200. There's a **rooms booking office** (East Car St) opposite the main temple entrance.

**Goswami Madam** (☎ 221108; goswamimm@sanchar.net.in; West St; r without/with AC Rs 125/555; ♿) A spare and clean guesthouse funded and maintained by private Hindu donors, this is an oasis of calm about 10 minutes' walk from the temple, where all guests are welcome.

**Hotel Maharaja's** (☎ 221271; 7 Middle St; d without/with AC incl tax Rs 294/519; ♿) Near the temple's west entrance, this is one of Rameswaram's better choices and is reasonably priced. Rooms are simple and most open out onto a common balcony though some have private balconies – the upper floors have good temple views.

**Hotel Sri Saravana** (☎ 223367; South Car St; r without/with AC from Rs 315/600; ♿) New in 2006, this hotel has a rooftop overlooking the ocean and cool, clean, tiled rooms; good value and one of the few with sea views.

**Hotel Tamil Nadu** (☎ 221277; Sannathi St; dm Rs 80, d without/with AC from Rs 300/700; ♿) The breezy ocean-front location is the main reason to choose this hotel. The rooms are worn, but most have balconies or sit-outs and the staff is refreshingly cheery. It's extremely popular with pilgrims, so book if you can. The restaurant (mains Rs 10 to 75, open breakfast, lunch and dinner) has all the atmosphere of a school canteen but it's very popular for its thalis (Rs 30) and is one of the few places in town serving a range of nonveg food such as butter chicken (Rs 60), local fish and (sometimes) chips, and noodles. There's also a bar (open 6pm to 10pm).

A number of inexpensive vegetarian restaurants along West Car St, such as Ashok Bhavan, serve thalis (Rs 15). Bee Mavilas Hotel is a basic, local lunch place that serves fish fries, curries and decent biryanis.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Buses run to Madurai every 10 minutes (Rs 49, four hours). There are SETC buses to Chennai (Rs 228, 12 hours, one daily), Kanyakumari (Rs 108, 10 hours, two daily) and Trichy every half-hour (Rs 82, seven hours).

There are also private buses and minibuses from the town centre to Chennai (Rs 400) and Madurai (Rs 125).

### TRAIN

Rameswaram's train line was closed in 2006 for an upgrade to broad gauge. It will take at least a couple of years to reopen.

## Getting Around

Town buses (Rs 1) 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 Rs 5 per hour – there's one opposite the temple entrance on East Car St, near the local bus stand.

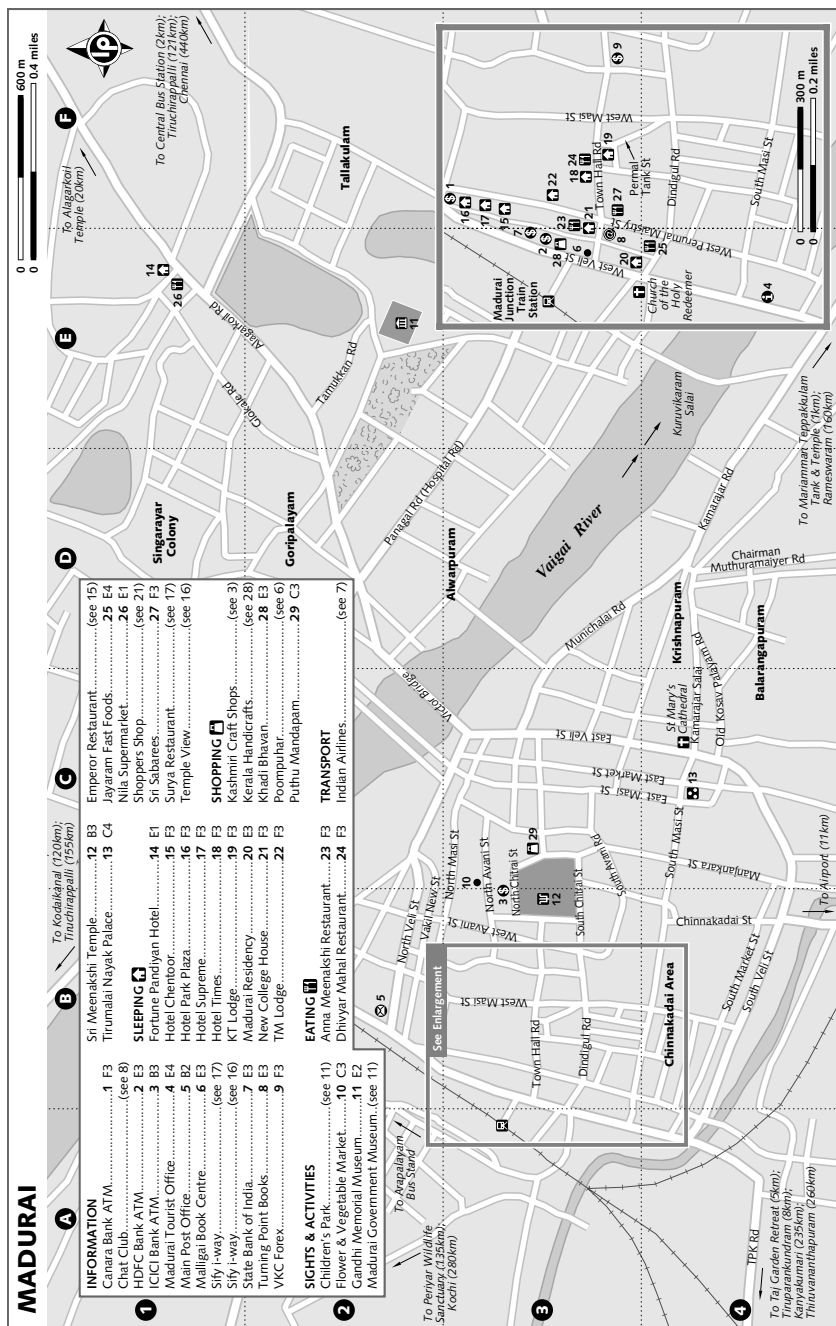
## MADURAI

☎ 0452 / pop 1.19 million

Famous for the awe-inspiring Sri Meenakshi Temple complex, Madurai is an animated city packed with pilgrims, beggars, businesspeople, bullock carts and underemployed rickshaw drivers. It's one of South India's oldest cities and has been a centre of learning and pilgrimage for centuries. A textile centre from way back, the city was also the setting for Mahatma Gandhi's decision, in 1921, to wear nothing but *khadi* (homespun cloth), and tailors' shops are everywhere in town.

Madurai's landmark temple in the heart of the old town is a riotously baroque example of Dravidian architecture with *gopurams* covered from top to bottom in a breathtaking profusion of multicoloured images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythical figures. The temple seethes with activity from dawn to dusk, its many shrines attracting pilgrims and tourists from all over the world; 10,000 visitors may come here on any one day.

Madurai is on virtually every traveller's Tamil Nadu itinerary – it has excellent transport links and some good midrange accommodation – but be prepared for oppressive touts.



## 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 invaders, 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.

## Orientation

The main post office, tourist office and many hotels are conveniently wedged between the train station and the temple.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Malligai Book Centre** (11 West Veli St; ☎ 9am–2pm & 4.30–9pm Mon–Sat) Opposite the train station, with a fair selection of books, maps and cassettes.

**Turning Point Books** (Town Hall Rd; ☎ 10am–9pm Mon–Sat) A 4th-floor bookshop opposite New College with many English-language titles.

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet places everywhere in town. Convenient ones include the following:

**Chat Club** (Town Hall Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am–11.30pm) Below Turning Point Books.

**Sify i-way** (110 & 114 West Perumal Maistry St; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 7am–11pm & 24hr) Adjoining Park Plaza and Supreme hotels.

### MONEY

**Canara Bank ATM** (West Perumal Maistry St)

**HDFC Bank ATM** (West Veli St)

**ICICI Bank ATM** (North Chitrai St)

**State Bank of India** (West Veli St) Has foreign-exchange desks and an ATM.

**VKC Forex** (Zulaiha Towers, Town Hall Rd; ☎ 9am–7pm) This is an efficient place to change travellers cheques and cash.

## POST

**Main post office** (West Veli St; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, parcel office ☎ 9.30am–7pm) Poste restante is at counter 8.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Madurai tourist office** (☎ 2334757; 180 West Veli St; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 11am–1pm Sat) Helpful staff when they're there, with brochures and maps. Tourist counters of sorts are also at the train station and airport.

## Sights

### SRI MEENAKSHI TEMPLE

With its colourful, intricately carved temple towers, the **Sri Meenakshi Temple** (camera Rs 30; ☎ 6am–12.30pm & 4–9pm) is a spectacular pastiche of Dravidian architecture. It 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. The temple complex occupies an area of 6 hectares. Its 12 highly decorative *gopurams* range in height from 45m to 50m (the tallest is the southern tower) and are adorned with carvings of celestial and animal figures. The **Puthu Mandapam** in the east forms a long and impressive entrance hall that leads to the eastern *gopuram*.

Within the walls of the temple, long corridors lead towards gold-topped sanctums of the deities. It is the custom here to honour the goddess first. Most pilgrims therefore enter the temple at the southeastern corner, through the Ashta Shakti Mandapam, and proceed directly to the Meenakshi shrine.

Also within the temple complex, housed in the 1000-Pillared Hall, is the **Temple Art Museum** (admission Rs 7; ☎ 7am–7pm). It contains painted friezes and stone and brass images, as well as one of the best exhibits on Hindu deities.

Allow plenty of time to see this temple. 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 Rs 200, so prepare to negotiate and be aware that they are often a front for emporiums and tailor shops.

### MADURAI MARKETS

Just north of the temple, before you get to North Avani St, the daily **vegetable market** is a labyrinth of bustling laneways strewn with aromatic herbs and vegetables. In the thick

of it, on the 1st floor of a nondescript cement building, is the gorgeous **flower market**. Vendors dexterously heap mountains of marigolds and jasmine onto scales for the temple flower sellers here.

#### TIRUMALAI NAYAK PALACE

Located about 1.5km southeast of the Meenakshi Temple, this Indo-Saracenic **palace** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera/video Rs 30/100; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm) was built in 1636 by the ruler whose name it bears. Today, only the imposing entrance gate, main hall and Natakasala (Dance Hall) remain. The rectangular courtyard, 75m by 52m, is known as the Swargavilasa or Celestial Pavilion and it gives clues to the original grandeur of the building, regarded as one of the finest secular buildings in South India.

There's a nightly **sound-and-light show** (Rs 10) which can be fun; the mosquitoes and people carrying on conversations throughout come at no extra cost. The English version is at 6.45pm and it's in Tamil at 8pm. The palace is a 20-minute walk from the temple.

#### MUSEUMS

Housed in the *tamukkam* (old exhibition pavilion), of the Rani Mangammal is the excellent **Gandhi Memorial Museum** (admission free, camera Rs 50; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm), 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; it's here because he first took up wearing the dhoti in Madurai in 1921. The **Gandhian Literary Society Bookstore** (☎ closed Sun) is behind the museum.

The **Madurai Government Museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm, closed Fri) is next door in the same grounds. Inside is a dusty collection of archaeological finds, sculpture, bronzes, costumes and paintings. A shady **children's park** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-8pm) with pay-as-you-go rides and slides is alongside the museums' entrance driveway.

#### MARIAMMAN TEPPAKKULAM TANK

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 popular **Teppam (Float) Festival**, held in January/February, when devotees boat out to the goddess temple in the

middle. When it's empty (most of the year) it becomes a cricket ground for local kids. The tank was built by Tirumalai Nayak in 1646 and is connected to the Vaigai River by underground channels.

#### Tours

The tourist office organises half-day sightseeing tours that include the Tirumalai Nayak Palace and Gandhi Memorial Museum, and finish at the Sri Meenakshi Temple. Tours start at 7am and 3pm and cost Rs 125 per person (minimum six people).

#### Sleeping

Most of Madurai's accommodation is concentrated in the area between the train station and the Sri Meenakshi Temple. There are loads of places to stay, with plenty of good hotels in the midrange bracket that are reasonably priced and excellent value.

#### BUDGET

Town Hall Rd, running eastwards from the train station, has a knot of cheap and not-so-cheerful hotels.

**KT Lodge** (☎ 2345387; 29 Town Hall Rd; s/d Rs 185/250) Upstairs rooms are good value here, big and airy, with TV. It's right in the thick of things, so you'll need your earplugs.

**Hotel Times** (☎ 2342651; 15-16 Town Hall Rd; s Rs 190, d Rs 300-420; ☎) Hotel Times is a gloomy place, but it's reasonably clean and mercifully quiet if you stay towards the back. Avoid the windowless rooms.

**TM Lodge** (☎ 2341651; www.maduraitmlodge.com; 50 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d Rs 200/320, d with AC & TV Rs 550; ☎) One of the brighter budget places in the area, this is efficiently run with clean linen and reasonably well-kept rooms. The upper rooms are definitely lighter and airier, some with private sit-outs.

**New College House** (☎ 2342971; collegehouse\_mdu@yahoo.co.in; 2 Town Hall Rd; r without/with AC from Rs 200/670; ☎) This is a huge complex virtually opposite the train station. The 250 rooms are varied – from minuscule to spacious – so check out a few as the cheaper rooms are tired and old, and street noise penetrates.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

Madurai's best-value accommodation is in the midrange hotels along West Perumal Maistry St near the train station, and most offer free pick-ups from the airport or train. Rooms without AC are a bargain and worth

making that step up from the budget joints. Most have rooftop restaurants with temple and sunset views.

**Hotel Chentoor** (☎ 2350490; www.hotelchentoor.com; 106 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d Rs 420/460, with AC from Rs 750/850; 🏠) Chentoor is one of the first high-rise hotels you come to when walking north along West Perumal Maistry St. The standard rooms are smallish but very clean and comfortable, and several AC rooms have temple views and balconies, and the rooftop restaurant is breezy.

**Madurai Residency** (☎ 2343140; www.madurairesidency.com; West Marret St; s/d Rs 425/490, r with AC from Rs 850; 🏠) This is a good-value hotel, with bright, clean rooms – some with temple view – and the highest rooftop restaurant views in town. Breakfast is included with AC rooms.

**Hotel Supreme** (☎ 2343151; www.supremehotels.com; 110 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d from Rs 460/500, r with AC from Rs 840; 🏠) This is another large, well-presented hotel though its growing popularity has brought a noticeable decline in service. However, rooms are comfortable with large windows; many of the AC rooms have balconies and great temple views. Its restaurant is popular and there's a bar decked out like a spaceship!

**Hotel Park Plaza** (☎ 3011111; www.hotelparkplaza.net; 114 West Perumal Maistry St; s/d Rs 1075/1350; 🏠) The Plaza's lobby is slightly more upmarket than its neighbours, and rooms are standard midrange, comfortable and simply furnished. The front rooms have temple views from the 3rd floor up. There's a good rooftop restaurant and the (inappropriately named) Sky High Bar – on the 1st floor.

**Fortune Pandiyan Hotel** (☎ 2537090; www.fortunepandiyanhotel.com; Alargakoil Rd; s/d Rs 2500/3000; 🏠 🚗) New in 2005, one of this smart hotel's big draws is a clean swimming pool in a garden setting. Nonguests can use it for Rs 100, and there's a women-only session between 11am and 1pm daily; there's also exercise equipment in the fitness room.

**our pick** **Taj Garden Retreat** (☎ 2371601; www.tajhotels.com; 40 TPK Rd; s/d from Rs 3700/4200; 🏠 🚗 🚶) In a stunning hilltop location of landscaped grounds and an 1890 colonial building, this is the best hotel in Madurai. Located 5km west of the city in Pasumalai, it's either peaceful or inconvenient, depending on your point of view.

## Eating

Along West Perumal Maistry St, the rooftop restaurants of a string of hotels offer breezy night-time dining and temple views; most also have AC restaurants open for breakfast and lunch.

**Jayaram Fast Foods** (Dindigul Rd; mains Rs 25-75; 🍴 lunch & dinner) With a busy bakery downstairs and a spotless AC restaurant upstairs, this makes a pleasant change from thali places. Ice cream and fruit salad is a favourite with families and courting couples, and the menu includes soups, spring rolls, pizzas and burgers.

**Surya Restaurant** (110 West Perumal Maistry St; mains Rs 30-70; 🍴 dinner) The rooftop restaurant of Hotel Supreme offers a superb view over the city, multicuisine veg food including pasta, spectacular lunchtime thalis and cold beer.

**Dhivyar Mahal Restaurant** (☎ 2342700; 21 Town Hall Rd; mains Rs 30-80; 🍴 lunch & dinner) One of the better multicuisine restaurants not attached to a hotel, Dhivyar Mahal is clean and bright. Roast leg of lamb (Rs 80) makes an interesting change, half tandoori chicken is Rs 80 and prawn masala is Rs 75.

**Emperor Restaurant** (☎ 2350490; 106 West Perumal Maistry St; mains Rs 30-80; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An all-day rooftop dining area, the restaurant at the Hotel Chentoor appears to be an afterthought, but the food, views and service are all good and nonveg food is served.

**Temple View** (☎ 3011111; 114 West Perumal Maistry St; mains Rs 55-140; 🍴 dinner) The nightly rooftop restaurant at the Hotel Park Plaza serves multicuisine veg and nonveg dishes. Butter chicken masala is Rs 80 and the tandoori chicken (half a chicken Rs 110) is especially succulent.

**Taj Garden Retreat** (☎ 2371601; www.tajhotels.com; 40 TPK Rd; mains from Rs 150; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The indoor/outdoor restaurant is perched in the gardens above the city, with stunning sunset views. If you're hankering for spag and salad in relaxed surrounds, this is the place to come.

Among the cheap and cheerful South Indian veg restaurants in the old town is **Anna Meenakshi Restaurant** (West Perumal Maistry St), a busy place good for thalis (Rs 30). **Sree Sabarees** (West Perumal Maistry St) always has a crowd at the outside chai and snacks stand; stop by for a cuppa (Rs 3.50) or eat veg food inside.

**Shoppers Shop** (Town Hall Rd; 🍴 8am-11pm) and **Nila Supermarket** (Alargakoil Rd; 🍴 7am-11pm) are well-stocked grocery stores including a good selection of Western foods.



## Shopping

Madurai teems with cloth stalls and tailors' shops. 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 Rs 150.

The fixed-price government shops are conveniently located together in West Veli St, including Poompuhar, Kerala Handicrafts and Khadi Bhavan (*khadi* is the homespun cloth made famous by Gandhi's decision, taken in Madurai, to wear it). Every tout, 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.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Indian Airlines** (☎ 2341234, airport 2690771; West Veli St; ✈ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) flies daily to Mumbai and Chennai. Jet Airways also flies daily to Chennai, as does newcomer **Paramount Airways** (☎ 1800 180 1234; www.paramountairways.com). Air Deccan flies daily to Bengaluru. None of these airlines three 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; Melur Rd), 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 Rs 2. Autorickshaw drivers charge Rs 70.

Private bus companies offer superdeluxe coaches with video services to Chennai and Bengaluru (Rs 220 to 300) but the state bus companies have similar services and while travel agencies sell tickets – often at an inflated price – you may end up on a state bus anyway. The table, right, 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 hourly buses to Kumili (Rs 45, 4½ hours) for the

### BUSES FROM MADURAI

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	182	12	4 daily
Chennai	144–186	10	every 30min
Chidambaram	85	8	3 daily
Kochi	144	8	2 daily
Kanyakumari	90	6	hourly
Mysore (via Ooty)	260	16	1 daily
Puducherry	105	8	2 daily
Rameswaram	59	4	every 30min
Tirupathi	180	5½	6 daily
Trichy	40	3	every 10min
Trivandrum	215	9	2 daily

Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. There are regular stopping services to Coimbatore (Rs 75, six hours) and to Kodaikanal, with an express to Kodaikanal leaving daily at 12.45pm (Rs 40, four hours). Buses to Palani leave every half-hour (Rs 35, five hours).

### TRAIN

Madurai Junction is on the main Chennai–Kanyakumari line. There are at least nine daily trains to Chennai, including the overnight *Pearl City Express* (sleeper/3AC Rs 200/550, 10 hours) at 10.30pm and the *Vaigai Express* (2nd class/chair class Rs 114/397, eight hours) at 6.45am. Chennai trains stop at Trichy (2nd class/sleeper Rs 47/75, three hours). To Kanyakumari there are three daily services (sleeper/3AC Rs 107/300, six hours).

Other services include Madurai to Coimbatore (2nd class/sleeper Rs 62/98, 6½ hours) and Bengaluru (sleeper/3AC Rs 179/502), as well as Trivandrum and Mumbai.

## Getting Around

The airport is 12km south of town and taxis cost Rs 200 to the town centre. Autorickshaws ask around Rs 100. 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 19,678

Approached through a surreal landscape of wind farms, Kanyakumari is the 'Land's End' of the Indian subcontinent, where the Bay of

Bengal meets the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Chaitrapurnima (Tamil for the April full-moon day) is the time to experience simultaneous sunset and moonrise over the ocean.

Kanyakumari has great spiritual significance for Hindus, and is dedicated to the goddess Devi Kanya, an incarnation of Parvati. Pilgrims come here to visit the temple and bathe in the sacred waters. Although wildly overdeveloped, the town and fishing beaches still manage a certain relaxed charm and there's enough to keep you occupied for a day or so.

## Orientation & Information

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.

**Internet** (Main Rd; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 10am-8pm) Slow and expensive internet access.

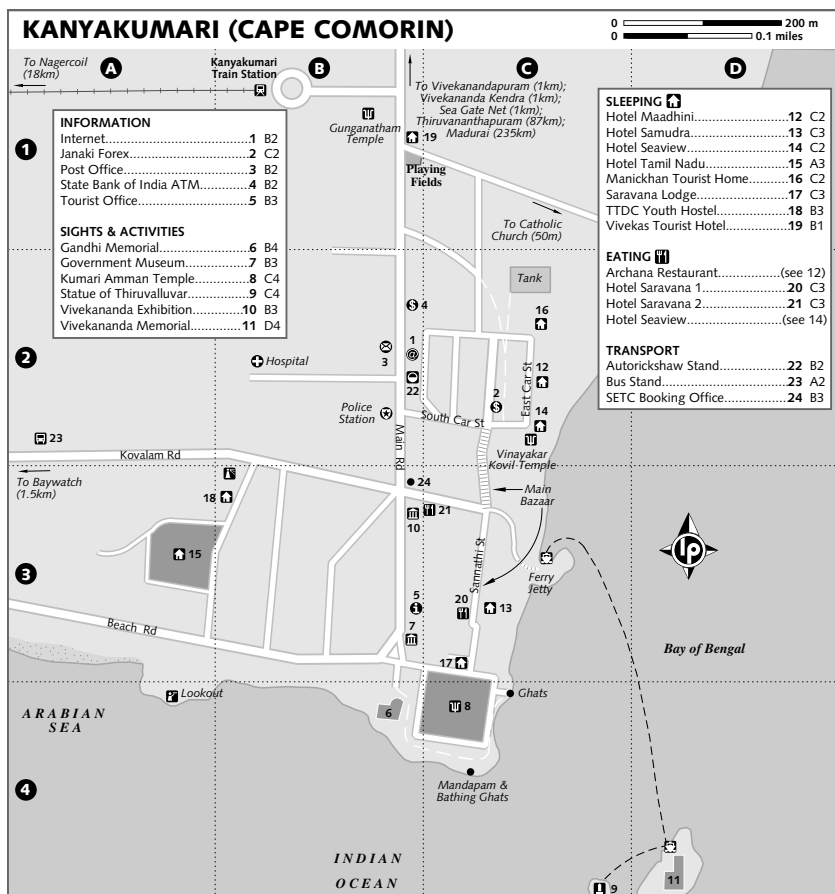
**Janaki Forex** (☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Off South Car St. Change cash and travellers cheques here.

**Post office** (Main Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) About 300m north of the tourist office.

**Sea Gate Net** (per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-9pm) Slow but less expensive internet access here, opposite the Vivekanandapuram entrance gate.

**State Bank of India ATM** (Main Rd)

**Tourist office** (☎ 246276; Main Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Get a useful, free *In and Around Kanyakumari* brochure here.



## Sights & Activities

### KUMARI AMMAN TEMPLE

According to legend, the *kanya* (virgin) goddess Devi single-handedly conquered demons and secured freedom for the world. At this **temple** (☎ 4.30am-12.30pm & 4-8pm) pilgrims give her thanks for the safety and liberty she attained for them. Unusually, men must remove their shirts here. Cameras are forbidden.

In May/June there is a **Car Festival** where an idol of the deity is taken in procession.

### GANDHI MEMORIAL

This striking **memorial** (admission by donation; ☎ 7am-7pm) resembling an Orissan temple and with elements of Hindu, Islamic and Christian architecture in its design, was used to store some of the Mahatma's ashes. Each year, on Gandhi's birthday (2 October), the sun's rays fall on the memorial stone where his ashes were safely kept. Guides may ask for an excessive donation, but Rs 10 is enough.

### VIVEKANANDA EXHIBITION & VIVEKANANDAPURAM

In a quirky, purpose-built terracotta building, this **exhibition** (Main Rd; admission Rs 2; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-8pm) details the life and extensive journey across India made by the Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda (the 'Wandering Monk'; 1863-1902), who developed a synthesis between the tenets of Hinduism and concepts of social justice. Although the storyboards are labelled in English, there's a lot to digest in one visit; if you're overwhelmed, concentrate on enjoying the photos and Swamiji's letters.

A more interesting pictorial exhibition can usually be found at **Vivekanandapuram** (☎ 247012; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-9pm), a spiritual mission and ashram 3km north of town. The exhibition was closed for renovation in late 2006, but – when open – covers not only the life of Vivekananda in prints, sketches and pictures but is a snapshot of Indian philosophy, religion, leaders and thinkers.

### VIVEKANANDA MEMORIAL

This **memorial** (admission Rs 10; ☎ 8am-5pm) is on a rocky island about 400m offshore. Swami Vivekananda meditated here in 1892 before setting out to become one of India's most important religious crusaders. The *mandapam*, which was built here in Vivekananda's memory in 1970, reflects architectural styles from all over India. Regardless of the number

of pilgrims filing through the memorial, it remains a very peaceful and reverent place. From the island there's a fine view back over the fishing harbour and to distant mountains and wind turbines.

The huge **statue** on the smaller island is not of Vivekananda but of 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; the cost is Rs 20 for the circuit.

### GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

The **museum** (Main Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Sat-Thu) houses a standard display of archaeological finds and temple artefacts.

### BAYWATCH

Tired of temples? This impressive **amusement park** (☎ 246563; www.baywatch.co.in; adult/child Rs 240/180; ☎ 10am-7pm) is a great way to spend the day, especially if you've got kids in tow. The entry ticket gives unlimited access to a wave pool with water slides (women should swim in at least knee-length shorts and shirt for propriety!) and a host of rides. Its adjacent **wax museum** (adult/child Rs 50/40), the first and – as we write – the only one in India, contains figures of notable nationals.

### Sleeping

Some hotels, especially the midrange places around the bazaar, have seasonal rates, so you may find that prices double here during April and May, and late October to January. Many places also charge more for a 'sea view' or 'rock view' and few offer single rates.

### BUDGET

**TTDC Youth Hostel** (☎ 246257; dm Rs 50) This hostel is part of Hotel Tamil Nadu. The dormitories and common bathrooms are pretty dire but you can't beat the price and the location is great.

**Vivekananda Kendra** (☎ 247177; ngc\_vkendra@sancharnet.in; Vivekanandapuram; dm Rs 75, r from Rs 150, with AC from Rs 500; ☎) Though 2km from town, this big ashram guesthouse trumps other budget places in terms of peace, quiet and general cleanliness; the three-bed AC room (Rs 700) with private sitting room is great value. Spa-

cious grounds with peacocks lead down to a sunrise viewpoint of the ocean and statue. A free shuttle bus runs hourly into town.

**Vivekas Tourist Hotel** (☎ 246192; Main Rd; d from Rs 195) Rooms here are simple but very spacious and reasonably clean; it's just opposite the train station.

**Saravana Lodge** (☎ 246007; Sannathi St; r Rs 200-300) Just outside the temple entrance all rooms have TV and private bathroom with squat toilet; it's very clean and good value. Go for the breezy upstairs rooms.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Tamil Nadu** (☎ 246257; Beach Rd; r without/with AC Rs 450/750; 🏠) Despite the usual quirks of a government-run hotel, this is a great location if you want to be a beachfront walk away from the chaos of town; balcony rooms have ocean, though not temple, views.

**Hotel Samudra** (☎ 246162; Sannathi St; r without/with sea view Rs 470/670, with AC Rs 970; 🏠) Right in the bazaar and near the temple, this hotel is a bit faded but the rooms (especially those overlooking the tank and temple) and service are fine.

**Manickhan Tourist Home** (☎ 246387; d without/with AC Rs 550/1100; 🏠) Many of the rooms at this friendly hotel have been recently and flamboyantly renovated. Most have balconies and many overlook the ocean.

**Hotel Maadhini** (☎ 246787; East Car St; r ground fl/sea view Rs 500/700, with AC from Rs 1200; 🏠) Next door to Manickhan Tourist Home, this hotel offers much the same, plus an excellent garden restaurant.

**Hotel Seaview** (☎ 247841; seaview@sancharnet.in; East Car St; d without/with AC Rs 1400/1950, with sea view Rs 1750/2550; 🏠) The deliciously cool marble lobby signals that this is one of the top places to stay in town. Rooms are neat, clean and well furnished but you pay more for the sea views here than elsewhere.

### Eating

There are plenty of fruit stalls and basic veg restaurants in the bazaar area, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**Archana Restaurant** (East Car St; mains Rs 25-95) At the Hotel Maadhini, this restaurant is one of the more atmospheric places to eat, especially in the evening when the garden section is open. There's a good menu including tandoori chicken, seafood and Chinese, and you can

### BUSES FROM KANYAKUMARI (CAPE COMORIN)

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	333	15	1 daily
Chennai	280	16	6 daily
Kodaikanal	132	10	1 daily
Kovalam	40	3½	1 daily
Madurai	76	6	8 daily
Rameswaram	108	9	2 daily
Trivandrum	31	3	2 daily

watch chapatis (unleavened Indian bread) being made before your eyes.

**Hotel Seaview** (East Car St; mains Rs 30-150) This upmarket hotel also has an excellent AC multicuisine restaurant specialising in fresh local seafood.

Hotel Saravana has two clean, busy veg restaurants with thalis (Rs 25) and good chai.

### 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. For details of services, see the table, above.

#### TRAIN

The train station is about 1km north of the bazaar and temple. The daily *Chennai Egmore Express* departs for Chennai at 5.15pm (sleeper/2AC/3AC Rs 189/321/1026, 13 hours) and the 6.35am *Tiruchirappalli-Howrah Express* to Chennai departs on Saturday. The same trains stop at Madurai and Trichy.

To Trivandrum there are two daily express trains (2nd class/3AC Rs 33/183, two hours, 87km).

For the real long-haulers or train buffs, the weekly *Himsagar Express* runs all the way to Jammu Tawi (in Jammu and Kashmir; see p365), a distance of 3734km, in 66 hours – the longest single train ride in India.

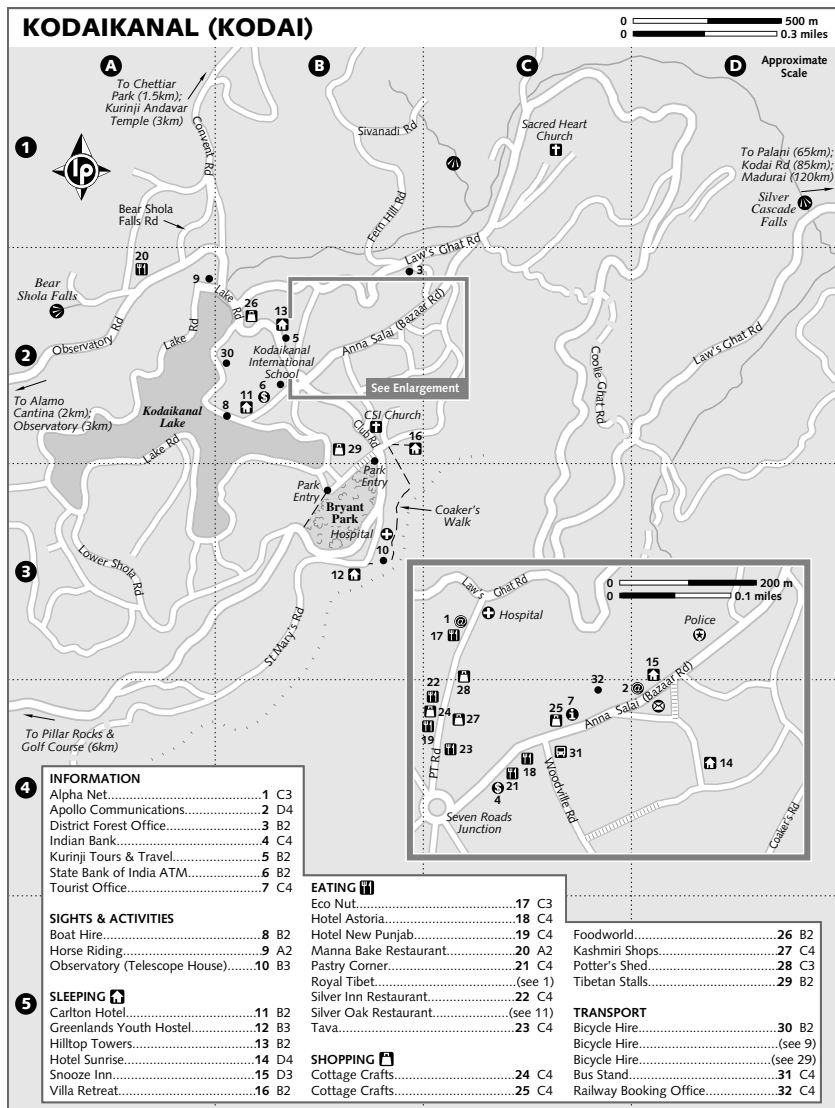
## THE WESTERN GHATS

The Western Ghats stretch out like a mountainous spine for around 1400km from the north of Mumbai, across Maharashtra, Goa,

Karnataka and Kerala, before petering out at the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. The hills (with an average elevation of 915m) are covered with evergreen and deciduous forest, and are the source of all the major rivers in South India. They also form a diverse biological and ecological haven with 27% of all India's flowering plants, 60% of

all medicinal plants and an incredible array of endemic wildlife, along with several tribal groups whose traditional lifestyle is fast being eroded.

For travellers these mountain areas mean opportunities to trek and see wildlife, and to hang out in Tamil Nadu's climatically cool hills stations of Ooty and Kodaikanal.



## KODAIKANAL (KODAI)

☎ 04542 / pop 32,931 / elev 2100m

Kodaikanal is a stunningly situated and easy-going hill station on the southern crest of the Palani knolls, some 120km northwest of Madurai. It's surrounded by wooded slopes, waterfalls and precipitous rocky outcrops and the winding route up and down is breathtaking.

Kodai is the only hill station in India set up by Americans, when missionaries established a school for European children here in 1901. The legacy of this is the renowned Kodaikanal International School, whose cosmopolitan influence is felt throughout the town.

The Kurinji shrub, unique to the Western Ghats, is found in Kodaikanal. Its light, purple-blue-coloured blossoms flower across the hillsides every 12 years; next due date 2018! Australians will feel at home among the many fragrant gum trees.

Kodaikanal provides an escape from the heat and haze of the plains and the opportunity to hike in the quiet *sholas* (forests). It's a much smaller and more relaxed place than Ooty, though April to June is *very* busy. The mild temperatures here range from 11°C to 20°C in summer and 8°C to 17°C in winter. Given the mountainous environment, heavy rain can occur at any time; October and November can be seriously wet.

## Orientation & Information

For a hill station, Kodai is remarkably compact and the central town area can easily be explored on foot. There are several dial-up internet cafés, and a State Bank of India ATM near the Carlton Hotel.

**Alpha Net** (PT Rd; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-10pm) Internet access.

**Apollo Communications** (Anna Salai; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-8pm) Spacious internet access.

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

**Kurinji Tours & Travel** (☎ 240008; kurinjitravels@sancharnet.in; Lake Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm) Reliable help with onward travel arrangements.

**Tourist office** (☎ 241675; Anna Salai; ☎ 10am-5.45pm) Has answers if you ask the right questions.

## Sights & Activities

### WALKING & TREKKING

The valley views along paved **Cooker's Walk** (admission Rs 2, camera Rs 5; ☎ 7am-7pm) are superb when the mist clears. There's an **observatory** (admission Rs 3) with 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 early morning, counting kingfishers, before the tourist traffic starts.

## GLOBAL CLASSROOM

At weekends they cycle, boat, horse-ride, hike, shop, watch DVDs, hang out. They describe Kodai variously as a bubble; middle of nowhere; beautiful; clean; cold; isolated; small and cute; the boondocks. But one thing this particular group of students from Kodaikanal International School (KIS) agree on is its cosmopolitan food; no small compliment from these well-travelled teenagers from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Mumbai (Bombay), Canada, Delhi, Korea, Nepal, Tibet and the USA.

'Royal Tibetan – the food's really good.'

'Brownies and home-made ice cream at Pastry Corner – addictive!'

'Chicken noodles or sizzler at Silver Inn; they're the best!'

'Buffet at the Carlton. We're not usually allowed there because they serve alcohol, but the food's great. Well, there's lots of it anyway.'

'Veg food? Has to be Tava. Try the *sev puri* (crisp, puffy fried bread with potato and chutney).'

It's fair to say that the town, at least in its present form, owes its existence to the school. A nondenominational missionary school for more than 100 years, KIS has always worked towards tolerance and social justice; it's the town's main employer; and the multicultural background and presence of its students gives Kodai a worldly feel – and, of course, cuisine – that is quite different from most other small towns in India. Food for thought, hey?

*Virginia Jealous, with thanks to Ankita, Intisar, John, Mallimalika, Nitya, Preet, Prioska, Sarah, Tenzing and William*



The views from **Pillar Rocks**, a 7km hike (one-way beginning near Bryant Park), are excellent in 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 will need a guide though; one good option is the quietly knowledgeable Vijay Kumar of **Nature Trails Kodai** (☎ 242791, 99942-77373; www.nature-trails.net; per person per hr Rs 50, minimum 2 people), or talk to the helpful folk at Manna Bake Restaurant (p1092). Guides (per hour around Rs 70) of varying quality can also be arranged through the tourist office; its booklet *Trekking Routes in Kodaikanal* details walks ranging from 8km to 27km.

### PARKS & WATERFALLS

Near the start of Coaker's Walk is **Bryant Park** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), landscaped and stocked by the British officer after whom it is named. **Chettiar Park** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), about 1.5km uphill from town on the way to the Kurinji Andavar Temple, is a small and pretty landscaped park. There are numerous waterfalls, at their most impressive after rain of course. **Silver Cascade**, on the road outside Kodai, is often full of interstate tourists bathing and the compact **Bear Shola Falls** is in a pocket of forest about a 20-minute walk from the town centre.

### BOATING & HORSE RIDING

The lake at Kodai is beautifully landscaped and it appears to be *de rigueur* for families to get out on a boat. Both the Kodaikanal Boat & Rowing Club, and Tamil Nadu Tourist Development Corporation, rent similar boats for similar prices: Rs 20 to 40 for a two-seater pedal boat to Rs 140 (including boatman) for a Kashmiri *shikara* (covered gondola) for 30 minutes.

At the bicycle hire area by the lake you'll be accosted by guides renting horses. The fixed rate is Rs 130 per hour unaccompanied or Rs 200 with a guide but you can take a short ride for Rs 80. Some of these horses should be retired.

### Sleeping

Hotel prices can jump by up to 300% during high season (from 1 April to 30 June). Prices listed here are low-season rates.

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.

### BUDGET

**Hotel Sunrise** (☎ 241358; d Rs 200) This is a down-at-heel but friendly enough place, in a good location. The view from the front (though not from most of the simple rooms) is excellent.

**Greenlands Youth Hostel** (☎ 240899; dm Rs 100, d Rs 200-800) Near the southern end of Coaker's Walk, this remains the number-one choice for budget travellers, as much for the fine views as the cheap rooms. There's a crowded dormitory and a range of rooms from very basic doubles on the edge of the valley to more spacious rooms with balcony, fireplace and TV. Staff are cheery, the location is peaceful and treks can be arranged here.

**Snooze Inn** (☎ 240837; Anna Salai; d Rs 300-425) Snooze Inn is well run and good value, with a charming elderly gentleman often at the front desk. Rooms are plain but clean and all have TV; ask for one towards the back, these are quieter, with forest views.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Villa Retreat** (☎ 240940; www.villaretreat.com; Club Rd, Coaker's Walk; r Rs 690-890, cottages Rs 1890) At the northern end of Coaker's Walk, the terrace garden of this lovely old stone-built family hotel offers awesome valley views. The best rooms, somewhat overpriced, are the cottages with panoramic views. Most rooms have fireplaces and TV, and there's a cosy restaurant.

**Hilltop Towers** (☎ 240413; httowers@sancharnet.in; Club Rd; d/ste from Rs 750/1100) Near the Kodaikanal International School, Hilltop is a neat hotel with bright clean rooms and polished teak floors; those with views are particularly welcoming, as is the helpful staff.

**Alamo Cantina** (☎ 240566; the.alamo.kodai@gmail.com; r incl breakfast from Rs 1500) Just about ready to open when we visited, this quirky two-room log cabin – a 3km drive from town, but with a 20-minute walking short cut – is all terracotta, wood and bison horns, set in quiet pasture with forest behind.

**Carlton Hotel** (☎ 240056; www.krahejahospitality.com; Lake Rd; d/cottages Rs 3670/7150) Kodai's most prestigious hotel overlooks the lake, blending colonial style with five-star luxury and a price tag to match. Rooms are bright, spacious and some have private balconies with lake views. Leather chairs huddle around a central stone

fireplace in the main lounge which adjoins an excellent bar, billiard room and restaurant. There's also a children's playground, gym, sauna, massage and private boathouse.

## Eating

PT Rd is the best place for cheap restaurants and it's here that most travellers and students from the international school congregate. There's a whole range of different cuisines available, including a strong Tibetan influence. Don't expect an early breakfast in Kodai outside of your hotel; not much gets up and running before 9.30am.

**Manna Bake Restaurant** (☎ 243766; Bear Shola Falls Rd; dishes Rs 20-50; ☺ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner only Mon-Sat, order by 3pm) This tiny family-run café is a must for its simple home-cooked Western vegetarian food (sandwiches, pizza and soup) and homely atmosphere. The wholemeal bread is legendary and many a cold and hungry traveller has gorged on Ivy's apple crumble and custard (Rs 35). It's a 15-minute walk from town near Bear Shola Falls (fork right off Observatory Rd, then right down a very steep lane *before* the entrance to Hotel Clifton), and tucked down a leafy driveway.

**Hotel Astoria** (☎ 240524; Anna Salai; mains Rs 20-50, thalis Rs 30-50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The veg restaurant here is always packed at lunchtime for its excellent all-you-can-eat thalis.

**Tava** (PT Rd; mains Rs 30; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) A clean, fast and cheap veg option, there's a wide menu here and it's often packed; try the cauliflower-stuffed *gobi paratha* (spicy cauliflower bread) and *sev puri* (crisp, puffy fried bread with potato and chutney).

**Royal Tibet** (PT Rd; ☺ lunch & dinner) A very popular place, this serves tasty noodle soups and other Himalayan fare; steamed *momo* (dumplings; Rs 40) are good.

**Silver Inn Restaurant** (☎ 241374; PT Rd; mains Rs 30-100; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This country-style, family-run restaurant is a great place for brunch (full English breakfast is Rs 150) and the menu ranges from homemade fettuccine and pizzas, huge and delicious sizzler plates (Rs 110) and good salad to Indian and Chinese dishes.

**Hotel New Punjab** (PT Rd; mains Rs 30-100; ☺ lunch & dinner) For North Indian and tandoori dishes this is the best place in Kodai. Succulent tandoori chicken is Rs 100.

**Silver Oak Restaurant** (☎ 240056; Lake Rd; buffet lunch & dinner Rs 350; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The

restaurant at the Carlton Hotel puts on lavish buffet meals, though you might feel a bit out of place in hiking gear. After eating you can relax in the atmospheric bar or sit by the roaring fire in the lounge.

## SELF-CATERING

**Eco Nut** (☎ 243296; PT Rd; ☺ 10am-5pm, closed Sun) This interesting shop sells a wide range of locally produced organic health food – whole-wheat bread, muffins, cheese, salad greens – and essential oils, herbs and herb remedies.

**Pastry Corner** (Anna Salai; ☺ 9am-9pm) Pick up great picnic sandwiches and yummy brownies (Rs 5; after 3pm) here, or squeeze onto the benches with a cuppa to watch the world go by.

The local Sunday market, at the northern end of PT Rd, is a colourful riot of fresh produce, and **Foodworld** (Lake Rd; ☺ 9am-7.30pm) supermarket stocks pretty much everything else; there's also a Pastry Corner counter here.

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

## Shopping

The many handicraft stores stock good craftwork, and several reflect the local low-key but long-term commitment to social justice.

**Cottage Crafts Shops** (☎ 240160; Anna Salai & PT Rd; ☺ 10am-8pm) Run by the voluntary organisation Coordinating Council for Social Concerns in Kodai (Corsock), these shops sell goods crafted by disadvantaged groups; about 80% of purchase price returns to the craftspeople.

On PT Rd you'll find small Kashmiri shops, as well as the **Potter's Shed** (☺ 9am-8pm Thu-Tue, 9am-5pm Wed) with fine ceramics; proceeds go to help needy children.

By the lakeside entrance to Bryant Park Tibetan stalls sell warm clothing and shawls – good, cheap stuff to keep you warm on chilly nights.

## Getting There & Away

The nearest train station is Kodai Road, at the foot of the mountain, where taxis (around Rs 800) and buses (Rs 10) wait. There's a train booking office in town.

Don't expect a bus to be leaving from Kodaikanal in the next five minutes. Tickets for private buses can be booked at travel agents near the bus stand. For details of main bus departures from Kodaikanal see opposite.

**BUSES FROM KODAIKANAL (KODAI)**

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	283	11	1 daily
Bengaluru *	450	11	1 daily
Chennai	203-400	11	2 daily
Coimbatore	50	5	1 daily
Kochi*	400	8	1 daily
Madurai	34	3½	hourly
Madurai*	150	3	2 daily
Ooty	250	8	1 daily
Palani	20	2	8 daily
Trichy	57	5	3 daily

\*private buses

**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 and relatively high – the minimum charge is Rs 60, and sightseeing tours cost from Rs 300 for two hours to Rs 700 for six hours.

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/day Rs 10/75; ☎ 8am-6pm) around the lake.

**AROUND KODAIKANAL**

At the foothills of the Western Ghats, about three hours' drive below Kodaikanal off the Palani-Dindigul road, lies the extraordinary **Cardamom House** (☎ 0451-2556765, 09360-691793; www.cardamomhouse.com; r from Rs 2700). Created with love and care by a retired Brit, this low-key, comfortable guesthouse and gardens – 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.

**INDIRA GANDHI (ANNAMALAI) WILDLIFE SANCTUARY**

One of three wildlife sanctuaries in the Western Ghats along the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border, this cool, misty mountain park covers almost 1000 sq km of mostly teak forest and

evergreen jungle. It's home to elephants, gaurs, tigers, panthers, spotted deer, wild boars, bears, porcupines and civet cats, and the Nilgiri tahr – commonly known as the ibex – may also be spotted. The park also has a renowned medicinal plant garden and interpretive centre (check out the astrological medicine chart and beauty hints if you're feeling travel-weary), and is home to the tribal group of Kada people, many of whom work here. The park's elephant training centre can be visited on the guided vehicle tour.

The **park reception centre** (per person Rs 50, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ day visitors 6am-6pm) at Topslip, where trekking guides can be arranged and where there are several lodges, is about 35km southwest of Pollachi. While wildlife is often seen on the drive in, and you can wander around the reception centre surroundings, access to the inner forest is limited to tours (Rs 625 for a 25-seater bus, irrespective of numbers; one hour) or guided treks (Rs 100, maximum four people, four hours). Tours and treks run on demand. A day visit from Pollachi, using public transport, is feasible (see below).

**Sleeping & Eating**

Forest accommodation is available at and near Topslip. It *must* be booked in advance in Pollachi at the **WWO** (☎ 04259-2225356; Meenkarai Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), but hours and service here are erratic at best. Rooms in several simple lodges at Topslip are Rs 300; the somewhat more comfortable New Tree Tops lodge is Rs 1000; and dorm beds are available for Rs 20 at Ambulli Illam, 2km from the reception centre. There's a basic canteen at Topslip.

It's a fairly good bet you'll need to overnight in Pollachi; try **Sakthi Hotels** (☎ 04259-223050; sakthifibreproducts@vsnl.net; Coimbatore Rd; d Rs 200, with AC Rs 495; ☎).

**Getting There & Away**

The sanctuary is between Palani and Coimbatore. Regular buses travelling from both places stop at the nearest large town, Pollachi, which is also on the Coimbatore-Dindigul train line.

From Pollachi, buses leave the bus stand for Topslip at 6.15am, 11.15am and 3.15pm, returning at 9.30am, 1pm and 6.30pm. A taxi from Pollachi to the sanctuary costs around Rs 600 one way.

## COIMBATORE

☎ 0422 / pop 1.46 million

Although a large business and industrial city, Coimbatore is mainly a transport junction for travellers – a convenient stop if you're heading to the hill stations of Ooty or Kodaikanal. Sometimes known as the Manchester of India for its textile industry, Coimbatore is an easy-going place with plenty of accommodation and eating options.

### Information

Email facilities are available throughout the city, especially around the bus stands, and there are 24-hour ATMs dotted around the city.

**Blazenet** (Nehru St; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-12.30pm)

Internet access.

**HSBC ATM** (Racecourse Rd) Next to Annalakshmi Restaurant.

**ICICI ATM** (Avanashi Rd) Opposite Nilgiri's Nest.

**Main post office** (Railway Feeder Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) A few hundred metres north-west of the train station, reached via a pedestrian underpass from the platforms.

**Tourist office** (☎ 10am-5.45pm) Small office inside the train station.

**VKC Forex** (Raheja Centre, Avanashi Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) Change cash and travellers cheques.

### Sleeping

Low-budget and midrange accommodation is in abundance in the bus stand area and down the bustling and narrow Geetha Hall Rd, directly opposite the train station. More upmarket places are along Avanashi Rd.

**New Vijaya Lodge** (☎ 2301570; Geetha Hall Rd; s/d Rs 120/190) A basic but clean and friendly little hotel, this has good-value rooms with an internet café downstairs.

**Hotel Vaidurya** (☎ 4392777; www.hotelvaidurya.com; 73 Geetha Hall Rd; s/d from Rs 275/500, with AC Rs 650/750; 🏠) Vaidurya is a smart midrange place, with small but pleasant rooms in the main building; the cheaper rooms in the annexe are less inviting.

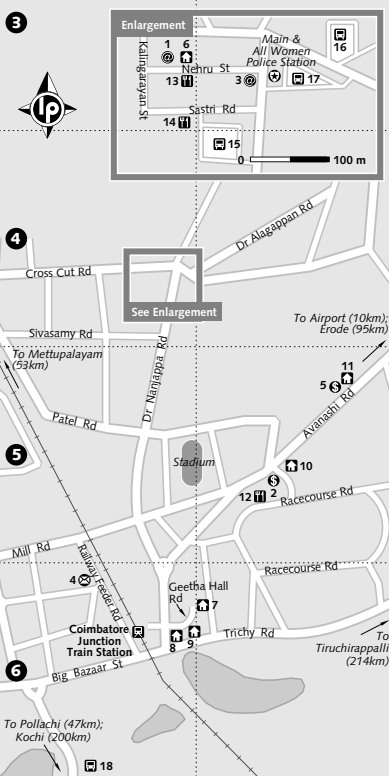
**Hotel Blue Star** (☎ 2230635; 369A Nehru St; s/d from Rs 300/450, r with AC Rs 700; 🏠) A sprawling hotel, this has simple, clean rooms; the top floor was recently renovated and is much nicer than downstairs. Management is friendly and it's convenient for the bus stands.

**Legend's Inn** (☎ 4350000; Geetha Hall Rd; s/d Rs 400/600, with AC Rs 750/850; 🏠) New in 2005, this hotel is a gem with comfortable furnishings, bamboo blinds, and sparkling bathrooms (long may they last).

## COIMBATORE

0 600 m  
0 0.4 miles

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**Nilgiri's Nest** (☎ 2214309; nilgiris@md3.vsnl.net.in; 739A Avanashi Rd; s/d from Rs 1250/1500; 🍽️) This intimate, well-run hotel has comfortable rooms, an excellent restaurant and supermarket and food hall attached.

**Residency** (☎ 2201234; www.theresidency.com; 1076 Avanashi Rd; s/d from Rs 3200/3500; 🍽️ 📺 🚿) Coimbatore's finest hotel has all the 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.

## Eating

There are numerous places around the train station serving thalis for around Rs 25. Another good place for inexpensive restaurants is along Sastri Rd and Nehru St just north of the central bus station. Avanashi Rd is Coimbatore's trendy area with several high-quality restaurants, and a fast foodhall and supermarket underneath Nilgiri's Nest (opposite).

**Gayathiri Bhavan** (Nehru St; mains Rs 40-80; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This popular veg restaurant has an interesting menu, an AC dining hall and an inviting outdoor seating area where you may have to wait for a table. The 'kebab corner' features marinated diced cottage cheese, capsicum, onion and vegetable kebabs, and there's a great range of juices, ice creams and shakes.

**Malabar** (Sastri Rd; mains Rs 50-100; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) In the KK Residency Hotel, this restaurant specialises in Kerala and North Indian food. The Malabar chicken roast (Rs 100) is a spicy treat and there are seafood choices such as tandoori pomfret.

**Annalakshmi** (☎ 2212142; 106 Racecourse Rd; set meals Rs 150; 🍽️ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) The top veg restaurant in town, this is run by devotees of Swami Shatanand Saraswati; the price of your

meal helps support the Shivanjali educational trust for underprivileged children.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 10km east of town. **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2399821; 1604 Trichy Rd) flies daily between Coimbatore and Mumbai (US\$160), Delhi (US\$325) and Kozhikode (Calicut; US\$50) and three times a week to Chennai (US\$100) and Bengaluru (US\$65).

**Jet Airways** (☎ 2212034) flies daily to Bengaluru (US\$75) and Chennai (US\$100). Newcomer **Paramount Airways** (☎ 1800 180 1234; www.paramountairways.com) also flies to Chennai. **Air Deccan** (☎ 2599885) offers cheap flights to Bengaluru (Rs 1400). These three airlines have counters at the airport, open to coincide with flight times.

### BUS

There are three bus stands in the city centre.

From the **Central Bus Station** (☎ 2431521) services depart to nearby northern destinations such as Ooty (Rs 31, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes) and Mettupalayam (Rs 10.50, one hour, every 10 minutes).

From **Thiruvallur bus station** (☎ 25249690) you can catch state and interstate buses to Bengaluru (Rs 160 to 225, nine hours, 10 daily), Mysore (Rs 60, five hours, every hour) and Chennai (Rs 199 to 275, 11½ hours, seven daily). 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 (Rs 25, three hours, every 20 minutes), Pollachi (Rs 10, one hour, every five minutes) and Madurai (Rs 70, five hours, every 30 minutes).

## MAJOR TRAINS FROM COIMBATORE

Destination	Train name	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departure
Bengaluru	<i>Kanyakumari-Bangalore Exp</i>	148-416	9	10.35pm daily
Chennai	<i>Kovai Exp</i>	116-404	7½	1.40pm daily
	<i>Cheran Exp</i>	116-404	8½	10pm daily
Kochi	<i>Sabari Exp</i>	93-261	5	8.50am daily
Madurai	<i>Coimbatore-Madurai Exp</i>	60-102	6	10.45pm daily
Ooty	<i>Nilgiri Exp</i>	22-35	7	5.15am daily
Pollachi	(via Mettupalayam)	24	1½	5 daily

**TRAIN**

Coimbatore Junction is on the main line between Chennai and Ernakulam (Kerala). For Ooty, catch the daily *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.

**Getting Around**

For the airport take bus 20 from the town bus stand or bus 90 from the train station (Rs 4). Many buses ply between the train station and the town bus stand (Rs 1.50).

Autorickshaw drivers charge around Rs 40 between the bus and train stations.

**AROUND COIMBATORE****ISHA YOGA CENTER**

This **ashram** (☎ 0422-2615345; www.ishafoundation.org; ☎ 6am-8pm), in Poondi, 30km west of Coimbatore, is also a yoga retreat and place of pilgrimage. The centrepiece is a multi-religious temple housing the Dhyanalngam, 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

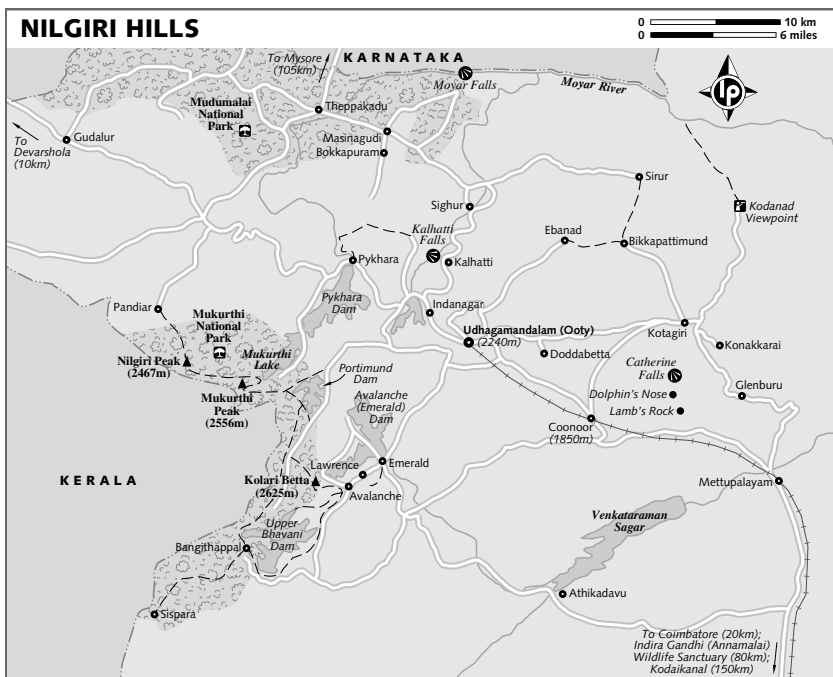
part in one- to two-week Isha yoga courses, for which you should register in advance. The ashram was founded by spiritual leader and yogi Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev and is home to an order of Bhramhacharya monks and devotees.

**METTUPALAYAM**

This commercial town is the starting point for the miniature train to Ooty. There's little of interest for travellers, but if you want to avoid a predawn start in Coimbatore to make the 7.20am connection here, there is plenty of accommodation available. Try **Nanda Lodge** (☎ 04254-222555; Ooty Main Rd; s/d Rs 195/290), which is basic but clean and right opposite the bus station, through which there's a short cut to the train station. **Hotel EMS Mayura** (☎ 04254-227936; 212 Coimbatore Rd; r without/with AC Rs 450/800; ☎), a decent enough midrange hotel, is 2km from the station. An autorickshaw to the station will cost about Rs 30.

**COONOOR**

☎ 0423 / pop 101,000 / elev 1850m





Coonoor is one of the three **Nilgiri hill stations** – Ooty, Kotagiri and Coonoor (see the Nilgiri Hills map, p1096) – that lie above the southern plains.

Climbing up out of the busy market area and looking down over the sea of red tile rooftops to the slopes behind, there's a strong sense of what hill stations were originally all about: peace, cool climate and some beautiful scenery. Although smaller than Ooty, Coonoor's centre doesn't come across as being any less busy, especially the area around the train station, bus stand and market, which is a bustling, choking mess with tenacious touts. Thankfully you leave all this behind at your accommodation, most of which is in quieter Upper Coonoor, 1km to 2km above the town centre.

## Sights & Activities

In Upper Coonoor the 12-hectare **Sim's Park** (adult/child Rs 5/2, camera/video Rs 25/250; ☎ 8.30am–6pm) 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.

There are several popular viewpoints around Coonoor. **Dolphin's Nose**, about 10km from town, exposes a vast panorama encompassing Catherine Falls across the valley. Heading out here early is the best bet for avoiding the mist. On the way back, drop into **Guernsey Tea Factory** (☎ 2230205; admission Rs 10; ☎ 8am–6pm) and take a short guided tour of the fragrant processing plant. Afterwards stop at **Lamb's Rock**, named after the British captain who created a short path to this favourite picnic spot in a pretty patch of forest. The easiest way to see these sights – all are on the same road – is on a taxi tour for around Rs 400 and, if you're feeling energetic, walk the 6km or so back into town from Lamb's Rock (it's mostly, but not entirely, downhill).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Vivek Coonoor** (☎ 2230658; Figure of Eight Rd; dm Rs 100, r from Rs 300–500) Many of the wide range of rooms here have balconies (screened to avoid the 'monkey menace') from which you can hear the tea-pickers plucking the leaves below you. There's also a monster dormitory. It's clean, well run and has a bar and restaurant.

**YWCA Wyoming Guesthouse** (☎ 2234426; s/d Rs 200/400) This ramshackle guesthouse in Upper

Coonoor is a budget favourite. Although ageing and draughty, the 150-year-old colonial house oozes character with wooden terraces and quiet, good views over Coonoor. Take an autorickshaw (around Rs 30) for ease, or catch a town bus to Bedford from where it's a 10-minute walk – you'll need to ask directions.

**Taj Garden Retreat** (☎ 2230021; www.tajhotels.com; Church Rd; s/d from US\$70/85) On the hilltop beside the All Saints Church, this fine hotel has beautiful gardens and enormous comfortable colonial rooms with polished floorboards, bathtubs and open fireplaces. The 'superior' rooms have a separate sitting room. The hotel also has an excellent multicuisine restaurant and a bar, and for the more health conscious, a gym, Ayurvedic and yoga centre.

**Tryst** (☎ 2207057; www.trystindia.com; d incl breakfast & dinner Rs 3900) If you're looking for a gregarious accommodation experience that's both 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.

Your best bet for eating is your hotel restaurant, though there are several eating places around the town centre below the train station.

## Getting There & Away

Coonoor is on the miniature train line between Mettupalayam (28km) and Ooty (18km) – see p1103. Buses to Ooty (Rs 6.50, one hour) and Kotagiri (Rs 8, one hour) leave roughly every 15 minutes.

## KOTAGIRI

☎ 04266 / pop 29,184

Kotagiri is a quiet village 28km east of Ooty. The oldest of the three Nilgiri hill stations, the village itself is dusty and uninspiring but the surrounding landscape of tea estates, tribal Kota settlements and rolling hills is a world away from the overdevelopment of Ooty.

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 Rs 600. The scenery on the road down to Mettupalayam is gorgeous, so you may want to detour this way if you're heading down from Ooty.

A couple of very basic lodges are in the small town centre and a splendid 1915 colonial building, **Stone House Retreat** (☎ 273300; www.naharhotels.com; r Rs 2000), offers fabulous views and atmosphere but charges like a wounded bull for all extras.

### Getting There & Away

Buses stop at the edge of town, about 1km from the centre. Buses to Ooty depart hourly (Rs 15, two 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 is South India's most famous 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'.

Until about 20 years ago it resembled an unlikely combination of southern England and Australia: single-storey stone cottages, bijou-fenced flower gardens, leafy winding lanes and tall eucalyptus stands, all surrounded by the tea plantations that were the town's original *raison d'être*. Times have changed and, if not for the climate and the rolling hills, Ooty's centre resembles any overburdened provincial Indian town.

But Ooty has an undeniable charm and the nearby hills and forest are sensational for trekking. Life here is relaxed and just a few kilometres out of town you are in the peace of the hills with superb views. 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.

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) it's crisp, clear and surprisingly cool. You'll need warm clothing – which you can buy very cheaply here – as the overnight temperature occasionally drops to 0°C.

### Orientation & Information

Ooty sprawls over a large area among rolling hills and valleys. In between the lake and the racecourse are the train station and the bus station. From either of these it's a 10-minute walk to the bazaar area and a 20-minute walk to Ooty's commercial centre, Charing Cross.

### BOOKSHOPS & LIBRARY

**Higginbothams** Commercial Rd (☎ 2443736; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat); Commissioner's Rd (☎ 2442546; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Good selection of contemporary English-language Indian and other fiction, and great postcards.

**Nilgiri Library** (Bank Rd; temporary membership Rs 350; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm, reading room 9.30am-6pm, closed Fri) Quaint little haven in a lovely crumbling 1867 building with a good collection of more than 40,000 books, including rare titles on the Nilgiris and hill tribes.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Global Net** (Commercial Rd; per hr Rs 25;

☎ 9.30am-9pm)

**Internet cafés** Church Hill Rd (per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10am-9pm); Commercial Rd (per hr Rs 20; ☎ 10am-10pm)

### MONEY

**Canara Bank ATM** (Commercial Rd)

**State Bank of India** (Bank Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri & 10am-2pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and has an ATM.

**State Bank of India ATM** (Commercial Rd)

**UK Forex** (Commercial Rd) Changes travellers cheques and cash.

**UTI Bank ATM** (Ettines Rd)

### NATIONAL PARK INFORMATION

**Wildlife Warden Office** (WWO; ☎ 2444098;

☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Manages Mudumalai National Park including advance booking for park accommodation (see p1104).

### POST

**Charing Cross post office** (Ettines Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Main post office** (Havelock Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Diagonally opposite St Stephen's Church.

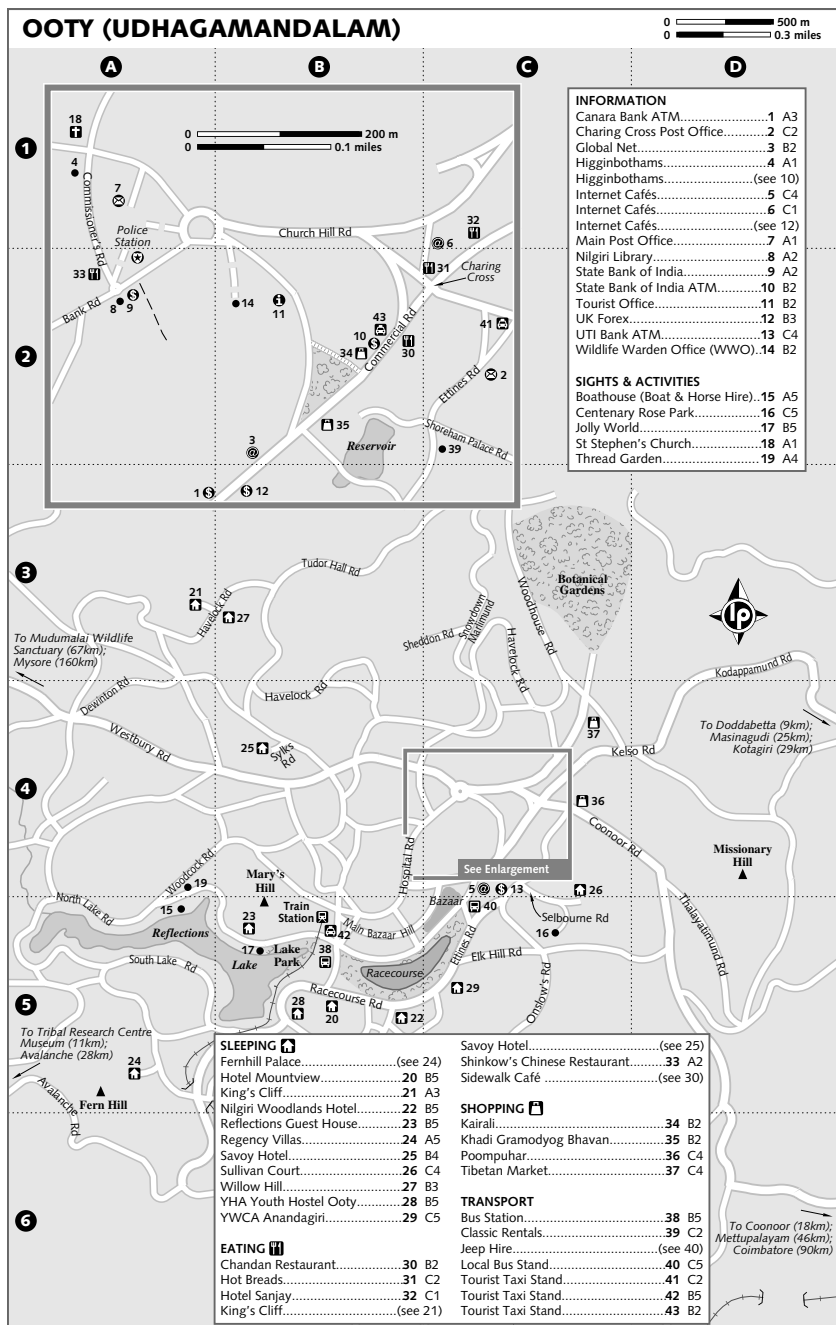
### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 2443977; ☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Fri) Maps, brochures and tour information.

### Sights

#### ST STEPHEN'S CHURCH

Built in 1829, the immaculately maintained **St Stephen's Church** (Church Hill Rd; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-5pm Mon-Sat, services 8am & 11am Sun) is the oldest in the Nilgiris. Its huge wooden beams came from the palace of Tipu Sultan in Srirangapatnam and were hauled the 120km by a team of elephants. Marble plaques on the walls, and the quiet and overgrown cemetery, commemorate



many an Ooty Britisher including John Sulivan, the town's founder.

### BOTANICAL GARDENS

Established in 1848, these beautifully maintained **gardens** (adult/child Rs 10/3, camera/video Rs 30/100; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) include some enormous mature trees as well as native shrubs and lush garden beds. There's also a fossilised tree trunk believed to be around 20 million years old.

### CENTENARY ROSE PARK

With its terraced lawns and colourful flowerbeds – best between May and July – this terraced **rose garden** (Selbourne Rd; adult/child Rs 10/5, camera/video Rs 30/50; ☎ 9am-6.30pm) is a pleasant place for a stroll. There are good views over Ooty from the hilltop location.

### THREAD GARDEN

The signs announce 'first time in world' and 'miracle', and while it might not exactly be the latter, the **Thread Garden** (☎ 2445145; North Lake Rd; admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 15/30; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm) is certainly an unusual exhibition. More than 150 species of flowers and plants from around the world have been 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.

### DODDABETTA LOOKOUT

Perched on the highest point (2633m) of the Nilgiris, this **viewpoint** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 7am-6pm) offers fabulous views across the surrounding peaks and plains. It's about 10km out of town; go early before the mist sets in. Any Kotagiri buses will drop you here.

### TRIBAL RESEARCH CENTRE MUSEUM

Under the auspices of the Tribal Research Centre (TRC), this interesting **museum** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) displays cultural exhibits from several tribes; the similarities and subtle differences are striking. Upstairs is a truly wonderful collection of photos taken on the centre's research trips including to the Andaman Islands, and – if you're lucky – knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff will make this a memorable visit. The museum is just beyond the village of M Palada, 11km from Ooty on the way to Emerald. Catch an Emerald bus (several daily) to the TRC stop just after M

Palada, or any of the frequent buses heading to M Palada and walk from there.

## Activities

### TREKKING

To appreciate the natural beauty of Ooty and its surrounds, walking is the way to go and a day hike will take you to some fine viewpoints, through evergreen forest, tea plantations and grassland, and often to a Toda village. If you want to get off the beaten track it's best to get a reliable guide with good local knowledge. For other nearby trekking options, consider the resorts near Mudumalai National Park (see p1104).

The senior guides of the long-standing **Queen of the Hills Tourist Guides Association** (☎ 2444449; seniappan@yahoo.com; half-/full-day trek Rs 250/400) – Seniappan, Sheriff and Mohan – are knowledgeable, affable and good English-language speakers. You'll usually find them around the bus station, or phone and someone will come to find you. Day walks meander through tea plantations, hills, Toda villages and forest, and you'll usually catch a local bus back at the end of the day. Overnight treks staying in a local village can also be arranged.

### 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. Prices are set, from Rs 50 for a short ride to Rs 150 for an hour, which takes you partway around the lake. The horses at the boathouse looked a lot better cared for than the mangy ponies hanging around the bus stand.

### BOATING

Rowboats can be rented from the **boathouse** (Rs 5, camera/video Rs 10/100; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) by the artificial lake (created in 1824). Prices start from Rs 60 for a two-seater pedal boat (30 minutes) and up to Rs 250 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 impossible to miss if you're in town. Outside the season,

## HILL TRIBES OF THE NILGIRI

For centuries, the Nilgiris have been home to hill tribes. While retaining integrity in customs, dress, principal occupation and language, the tribes were economically, socially and culturally interdependent.

The Toda tribe lived on the western plateau in the area now called Ooty. Their social, economic and spiritual system centred on the buffalo. The produce derived from the buffalo (mainly milk and ghee) was integral to their diet and it was used as currency – in exchange for grain, tools, pots and even 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, and they killed not for food but to provide company for the deceased. Other traditional customs that continue today include the division of labour; men care for the buffaloes and women embroider shawls used for ritual, as well as practical purposes. Today, only about 1500 Toda remain.

The Badaga migrated to the Nilgiri Hills 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, and they traded this for buffalo products from the Toda.

The Kotas lived in the Kotagiri area and were considered by other tribes to be lower in status. Artisans of leather goods and pots, the Kotas were also musicians. The Kotas 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 they 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. Kurumba witchcraft was respected and sought after by the other tribes.

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 performed special rituals for other tribes.

British settlement in the Ooty area from the early 19th century had a significant impact on tribal life. Some tribes adapted quickly, especially the Badaga. Being cultivators, they continued their traditional pursuits in untraditional ways; they cultivated the cash crops (tea and coffee) of the new settlers, but they were no longer able to provide the grains that were essential to the economy of the other tribes. Eventually, tribal systems, especially economic and cultural ones, began to 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. Others remain straddled across two cultures, maintaining vestiges of their traditions while embracing customs and beliefs of the dominant culture.

the 2.4km racecourse is little more than an overgrown paddock.

## JOLLY WORLD

This **amusement park** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am–7.30pm) is between the lake and the bus stand with stalls, sideshows, rides (Rs 5 to 50) and all the good stuff to keep kids occupied. For grown-up kids there's a **go-kart track** (Rs 60). It's busy on weekends when families invade Ooty.

## Tours

The tourist office (p1098) can put you in touch with agencies that run day trips to Mudumalai National Park via the Pykhara Dam (Rs 200; minimum 15 people) starting at 9.30am and returning at 7pm, with just a quick spin through the park. Trips to Coonoor and surrounds are also possible.

A better alternative is to hire a taxi for the day and go as you please. The rates are set at Rs 450 for a four-hour trip around Ooty, or Rs 1100 for a full day.

## Sleeping

Ooty has some of Tamil Nadu's best and/or most atmospheric accommodation if you're prepared to pay for it. It's a sellers' market in the busy 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. In town you'll be close to all amenities plus the inevitable noise and pollution, but peace, tranquillity and some wonderful midrange hotels can be found just a few kilometres away. Some guesthouses have open fires, either in bedrooms or in a common lounge, and there's generally a small charge for firewood and cleaning.

If you arrive by train with no accommodation booking, you can leave your bags at the station for a reasonable Rs 10 while you look around.

## BUDGET

**YHA Youth Hostel Ooty** (☎ 2447506; ootyouthostel@hotmail.com; 42 South Lake Rd; dm member/nonmember Rs 75/100, d Rs 300/400) Ten minutes' walk from the bus stand, this small hostel is quietly located by the lake but can get busy with local youth groups in high season.

**YWCA Anandagiri** (☎ 2442218; Ettines Rd; dm Rs 110, r & bungalow incl tax from Rs 345-650) The YWCA has many things going for it, not least the good location overlooking the racecourse, within walking distance of the town centre and bus stand. It's set in spacious grounds with a main building, and a cluster of separate cottages. There are two comfy large, colonial-style lounges, a library and dining room with fireplace, and most rooms are spacious and clean.

**Reflections Guest House** (☎ 2443834; North Lake Rd; d from Rs 350-600) This family-run place overlooks the lake in a peaceful location between the bus stand and the boathouse. Rooms are simple and clean with hot water in the morning – the ones above the main house have sit-outs and good lake views. Home-cooked meals can be ordered, and there's a lounge with TV and open fire.

**Hotel Mountview** (☎ 2443307; Racecourse Rd; r Rs 400-500) Perched on a quiet driveway directly above the bus station, these eight simple, big rooms in a once-elegant old bungalow are good value and well located.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Nilgiri Woodlands Hotel** (☎ 2442451; Racecourse Rd; d/cottage incl tax Rs 600/750) This Raj-era hotel is looking decidedly the worse for wear but it's full of mildewy faded character. Manicured gardens, and the gabled roof and red-tiled cottages, are a reminder of old Ooty.

**Willow Hill** (☎ 2444037; willow@sancharnet.in; 58/1 Havelock Rd; d Rs 800-1500) Sitting high above the town, Willow Hill's large windows provide some great views of Ooty. The rooms, all with wooden floors, are spacious and comfortable in the style of an alpine chalet, with the most expensive rooms offering a private garden. It's not as stylish as some, but it's friendly and affordable and there's a reasonable restaurant.

**King's Cliff** (☎ 2452888; www.kingscliff-ooty.com; Havelock Rd; d Rs 1275-1975) High above Ooty on Strawberry Hill, this is a delightful hotel built into a colonial mansion with wood paneling, antique furnishings and brilliant views. It's an intimate retreat with only nine rooms, and all have individual character along with fireplaces. Deluxe rooms have a private covered porch, and breakfast is included. There's a very comfortable lounge and popular fine restaurant.

**Regency Villas** (☎ 2442555; regency@sancharnet.in; Fernhill Post; r/cottages Rs 1800/1600) In a state of splendidly decaying grandeur, the rooms, furnishings and palatial bathrooms at what was the Maharaja of Mysore's former guesthouse have to be seen to be believed. Seeming little-changed over the last 100 years, you're paying for nostalgia and loads of atmosphere rather than modern creature comforts. When we visited in 2006, the Maharaja's summer pad next door, the extraordinary Fernhill Palace, was still undergoing a massive renovation programme in preparation for reopening as a seriously luxurious hotel.

**Sullivan Court** (☎ 2441416; sullivancourt@vsnl.com; Selbourne Rd; s/d from Rs 2600/2900) Ooty's most modern hotel, Sullivan Court boasts a stunning lobby with glass elevator, plush rooms, a good restaurant, children's play area, and gym – it's excellent value if you're after contemporary comfort rather than old-fashioned style.

**Savoy Hotel** (☎ 2444142; www.tajhotels.com; 77 Sylks Rd; s/d from US\$70/85) The Savoy is one of Ooty's oldest hotels, with parts of it dating back to 1829. Big cottages are arranged around a beautiful garden of flowerbeds, lawns and clipped hedges. Quaint rooms have large bathrooms, polished floors, log fires and bay windows.



Modern facilities include a 24-hour bar, excellent multicuisine dining room, an Ayurvedic centre, gym and tennis courts.

## Eating

Most of the hotels have their own restaurants, and some of the top-end places are great for lavish meals and atmospheric dining rooms. There are plentiful cheap eats in town.

**Hotel Sanjay** (☎ 2443160; Charing Cross; mains Rs 35-85; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a basic but bustling place with generous servings of veg and nonveg fare and a bar on the 1st floor.

**Sidewalk Café** (Commercial Rd; dishes Rs 40-60, pizzas Rs 45-125; ☺ lunch & dinner) A cross between an American diner and an Italian café is something you'd expect to find in Mumbai rather than the mountains, but it's a welcome change of scene. In bright, modern décor, efficient staff wheel out wood-fired veg pizzas, burgers, sandwiches (try the chilli cheese or mushroom toast), salads and awesome desserts and smoothies; there's even a cappuccino machine.

**Chandan Restaurant** (mains Rs 50-75, thalis Rs 50-70; ☺ lunch & dinner) At Hotel Nahar, Chandan serves up delicious veg dishes in elegant surroundings. Thalies are served at lunchtime or choose from a range of biryanis and Chinese dishes.

**Shinkow's Chinese Restaurant** (☎ 2442811; 38/83 Commissioner's Rd; mains Rs 50-150; ☺ lunch & dinner) Shinkow's is an Ooty institution and the simple menu of chicken, pork, beef, fish, noodles and rice dishes is usually pretty good.

Both the **Savoy Hotel** (mains from around Rs 140; ☺ lunch & dinner) and **King's Cliff** (mains Rs 80-200; ☺ lunch & dinner) have atmospheric restaurants with log fires and quality multicuisine food. The latter has no alcohol permit, but you can bring your own.

## QUICK EATS

There are plenty of basic veg places on Commercial and Main Bazaar Rds and you can get a spicy biryani for Rs 10 at street stalls near the bus stand.

**Hot Breads** (Charing Cross; ☺ 8am-10pm) This is a popular bakery turning out a huge range of breads, pastries, pies and sweets – go early for the fresh stuff. (Don't be put off by the Chinese shopfront; it's advertising the upstairs restaurant.)

Like Kodai, Ooty is famous for its delicious **home-made chocolates** (per 100g around Rs 50).

## Shopping

Ooty can be a fun place to shop, but don't expect anything out of the ordinary. 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. Poompuhar is on Coonor Rd.

There's no need to lug warm clothes up to Ooty – you can pick up jackets from Rs 100 and hats and gloves from Rs 10 at shops along Commercial Rd (near the bus stand) or at the **Tibetan market** (☺ 9am-8pm) almost opposite the entrance to the Botanical Gardens.

## 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! For details of bus services, see below.

Connect with trains to Chennai or Kochi (Cochin, Kerala) at Coimbatore.

To get to Mudumalai National Park (Rs 23, 2½ hours, 12 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 (Rs 10, 1½ hours), from where there are buses every two hours to Theppakadu.

### BUSES FROM OOTY (UDHAGAMANDALAM)

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bengaluru	155-250	8	7 daily
Chennai	228	15	2 daily (overnight)
Coimbatore	37	3	every 20min
Mettupalayam	17	2	every 20min
Mysore	69-100	4	11 daily

Local buses leave every 30 minutes for Kotagiri (Rs 10, two hours) and every 10 minutes to Coonoor (Rs 6.50, 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. 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 7.20am daily (1st/2nd class Rs 117/12; five hours, 46km). If you want a seat in either direction, be at least 45 minutes early or make a reservation (Rs 25) at least 24 hours in advance.

From Ooty the train leaves at 3pm and takes about 3½ hours. There are also two daily passenger trains between Ooty and Coonoor (1½ hours).

### Getting Around

Plenty of autorickshaws hang around the bus station – a ride from the train or bus stations to Charing Cross should cost about Rs 25, and a list of autorickshaw fixed prices is on a sign at the steps on Commercial Rd leading to the tourist information office.

Taxis cluster at several stands in town. There are fixed fares to most destinations including to Coonoor (Rs 300), Kotagiri (Rs 400), Gudalur, Mudumalai National Park and Coimbatore (all Rs 600).

You can hire a bicycle at the bazaar if you ask around, but many of the roads are steep so you'll end up pushing it uphill (great on the way down though!). Motorcycles can be hired from **Classic Rentals** (Ettines Rd; ☎ 9am–6pm) at RCM Tours & Travels. A Kinetic Honda, TVS scooter or 100cc Yamaha costs Rs 350 for 24 hours, or Rs 50 per hour. A deposit of Rs 500 is usually required.

## MUDUMALAI NATIONAL PARK

☎ 0423

In the foothills of the Nilgiris, this 321-sq-km park (admission Rs 35), and the surrounding forest outside the park boundaries, are the best places for wildlife viewing in Tamil Nadu. Part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (3000 sq km), the

reserve's vegetation ranges from grasslands to semi-evergreen forests that are home to chitals (spotted deer), gaurs (bisons), tigers, panthers, wild boars and sloth bears. Otters and crocodiles inhabit the Moyar River. The park's wild elephant population numbers about 600.

A good time to visit Mudumalai 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 admission price includes a Rs 20 mini-bus tour.

### Orientation & Information

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** (☎ 526235; ☎ 6.30–9am & 3–6pm) and some park-run accommodation.

The closest village is Masinagudi, 7km from Theppakadu.

### Tours

It's not possible to hike in the park and tours are limited to the sanctuary's minibuses. Private vehicles are not allowed in the park, except on the main Ooty–Mysore road that runs through it. **Minibus tours** (per person Rs 35 includes Rs 15 park entry fee, 45 mins) run between 7am and 9am, and 3pm and 6pm making a 15km loop through part of the park.

The once-popular elephant safaris stopped some years ago due to the animals' ill-health; if they do restart, this is the best way to see the park, especially in the early morning.

Guides can be hired for **trekking** outside the park boundaries, which also provides some rich wildlife habitat. Talk to the guys who hang around the park entry station, or ask at your resort; all have their own knowledgeable, English-speaking guides. Expect to pay around Rs 150 per person for a couple of hours of guided walking, or around Rs 350 per person for a four-hour combined jeep and walking tour; negotiate prices and group size in low season.

### Sleeping & Eating

All budgets are catered for – there are cheap and midrange lodges inside the park at Theppakadu; budget rooms and midrange cottages in Masinagudi; and midrange jungle resorts in Bokkapuram (4km south of Masinagudi).

For meals at the resorts, expect to pay from Rs 400 per person, per day.

### IN THE PARK

For most accommodation in the park, book in advance, in person, with the WWO in Ooty (p1098). In low season, you *may* be able to get accommodation if it's available by asking directly at the park reception centre. The following three park-run places are walking distance from park reception and on the banks of the river.

**Minivet Dormitory** (r per person Rs 35) A clean place, with two four-bed rooms, each with private bathroom with cold water only.

**Theppakadu Log House** (d/q Rs 330/560) and **Sylvan Lodge** (d/q Rs 330/560) are the pick of the places in the park. Overlooking the river, they're comfortable, well maintained and good value. There's a kitchen at Sylvan Lodge that prepares meals for booked guests.

The government-run **Tamil Nadu Hotel** (☎ 252 6580; dm/d/q Rs 75/295/495) is in the same cluster of buildings; it provides basic accommodation and basic meals.

### MASINAGUDI

There are several lodges on the main road in Masinagudi as well as the odd place for a meal. Unless you arrive after dark, there's little of interest in town; better head for the park or the nearby resorts. If you need to stay, try the following:

**Kongu Lodge** (☎ 2526131; Main Rd; s/d Rs 250/400), This simple place doubles as a bar and women travelling alone may feel uncomfortable here. A jeep ride from Masinagudi to the park costs around Rs 80, or wait for one of the buses passing through between Ooty and Theppakadu.

**Bamboo Banks Farm** (☎ 2526211; bambanks@sancharnet.in; cottages s/d Rs 825/1125) A couple of kilometres out of town towards Bokokapuram, long-established Bamboo Banks Farm offers four big, comfortable private cottages in the lush gardens of a family-run property. The landscape is beautiful but tamed here; you'll need transport to travel the few kilometres to wilderness areas.

### 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. The attraction here is wildlife – trekking in the jungle, jeep safaris, night safaris and bird-watching. Many resorts provide a pick-up service from nearby towns such as Ooty (starting from Rs 500), otherwise hire any jeep in Masinagudi. It's best to book rooms in advance, particularly in the high season. Each resort offers a range of services including visits to Mudumalai National Park, hikes with a guide, fishing and horse riding, all of which cost extra.

**Jungle Trails** (☎ 2526256; r from Rs 600) There are just a couple of simple rooms at this quiet escape, run for many years by Mark, a quirky and passionate local conservationist. Day visitors (per person Rs 100) are welcome to sit on the comfortable veranda, drink tea and watch the bush (from 6.30am to 8.30am and 4.30pm to 6.30pm). It's just past the bottom of the Singhur Ghat road that winds down from Ooty.

**Jungle Hut** (☎ 2526240; r from Rs 1200; 🚽) A big draw here is the water hole and swimming pool (great for steamy jungle days), and kids' playground. The rooms, though, are looking a bit tired and not such good value compared with others nearby.

**Forest Hills Guest House** (☎ 2526216; www.foresthillsindia.com; s/d/tr from Rs 850/1100/1400, huts Rs 1250) 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 and bird-watching. Staff are great and the food is terrific, and there's a slight colonial air here with a gazebo-style bar, games rooms and barbecue pit.

**Jungle Retreat** (☎ 2526470; www.jungleretreat.com; dm Rs 400, bamboo huts & standard r Rs 1500, cottage Rs 2500) This is one of the most stylish resorts in the area, with lovingly built stone cottages decked out with 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.

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