



## Architecture, Art and an Actress

### Highlights of the Coromandel Coast of India Study Tour 2010

By Andra Leo

Ahead of us on this Study Tour was a cornucopia of experiences far richer than I had imagined before we left, despite numerous, well-researched pre-trip presentations. Eighteen eager participants left for Chennai on 21 February with our tour leader, Pia Rampal. Her meticulously designed itinerary would be taking us on a time-travelling journey; a chronological trail going back to the 6th century AD then forward to the 18th.

Treading in the footsteps of the ancient dynasties of the Pallavas, the Cholas and the Pandyas, we were to see and be awe-struck by the sculptural and architectural wonders that they had created. At first, the rich, polysyllabic names that rolled so easily off Pia's tongue, seemed impossible to emulate. It wasn't long, however, before we were all talking confidently about the wonders of Mahabalipuram and the great temples of Chidambaram, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur and Madurai. The delicious-sounding Pondicherry evoked a more modern history – this tiny enclave was France's colonial possession in India until 1954 and retains the quiet elegance of its former days. A side trip to view the once-glorious mansions of Chettinad added to the romance of this sight and site-packed trip.

Huge billboards, with larger-than-life images of politicians, lined the roadsides. These became the trip's running gag. Foremost among the politicians was the former movie star Jayalalithaa, whose overblown image smirked down on us as we drove south. Each billboard presented yet another face of this erstwhile actress-turned-politician. It soon became a game to capture as many different versions of her persona as possible on camera – one coyly shy, another sternly admonishing, yet another benignly maternal – but all ensured the viewer never

forgot her former fame and youthful beauty. On each billboard the fleshy, 62-year-old face was side-by-side with the lovely young starlet's. The tour de force was a billboard depicting her face from infancy to adulthood.

Tamil Nadu's politics are closely entwined with former film stars - the more famous they were, the more likely they would be elected to public office. Stars are idolised and the latest Tamil movie draws crowds eager to lose themselves in



Jayalalithaa Billboard



the plot's twists and turns. In fact, the audience participates enthusiastically – during the trip we had an opportunity to witness this and enjoy the electric atmosphere a popular star's movie generates.

Our first destination, Mahabalipuram, was a treasure trove of rock-cut temples and sculpture. Now a UNESCO World Heritage site, the area was developed by the Pallavas, who reigned for over 400 years. Here temples were painstakingly hewn out of monolithic boulders; each one decorated with intricately worked bas-reliefs depicting tales from the Hindu pantheon. There was Krishna saving a village, Vishnu saving Prithvi the earth goddess from being submerged, and Arjuna doing penance in order to earn a boon from Shiva. This incredible bas-relief is carved onto an enormous rock alive with exquisitely wrought figures of humans and animals. An extraordinary work of art, it inspires amazement not only because of the quality of the carvings but also because of the sheer scale of the undertaking.

Not far from this complex are the Five Rathas – free-standing temples, each one carved out of a single gigantic rock. These temples were never used as places of worship but apparently were experiments in design and thus served as prototypes for later South Indian temples. One such is Mahabalipuram's Shore Temple, which has endured tempests and tsunamis for more than 1,000 years and is the lone survivor of a series of seven temples built along the shoreline. It was in this temple that the *gopuram* – gateway – first made its appearance.

Modest here, it would eventually reach great heights in temples such as the Ekambareswarar in Kanchipuram and the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, which has four lofty *gopurams*, each one lavishly and colourfully embellished with images from Hindu mythology. The Meenakshi Temple in Madurai has as many *gopurams* as there are entrances – 10 in all. However, it was Raja Raja's magnificent Brihadeswarar Temple in Thanjavur where the *gopuram* achieved its zenith. There it soars 90 feet skyward, an ornate and magnificent testament to the architectural skills of its builders and the creativity of its sculptors. It was here that we also had the privilege of witnessing the bathing of the Nandi – a gigantic granite bull believed to be Shiva's *vahana* (mount). Our itinerary had been carefully timed to include this impressive fortnightly ceremony.

Each of the temples we visited was an architectural masterpiece with *gopurams*, imposing 1,000-column halls and splendid *vimanas* (towers erected above the temple's sanctum sanctorum). The farther south we travelled, the more impressive each temple was. With each, it seemed we had already seen the most majestic - until we saw the next one. We were impressed not only by the architecture but also by the superlative sculptures that bedecked the walls and columns and by the intricate and endlessly fascinating bas-reliefs found in each temple. All had stories to tell. The beautiful sandstone Kailasanathar Temple in Kanchipuram is a treasury of bas-reliefs depicting the god Shiva. Although many are sadly eroded, enough remain to remind us of the sculptors' consummate talent.

En route to Thanjavur we visited one of the most ancient temples in Tamil Nadu – the Sri Nageswarar in Kumbakonam. In this



Meenakshi Temple gopuram, Madurai



Thanjavur's Gigantic Nandi



A Chettinad Mansion

small temple exquisite sculptures stand on a ledge along the outer wall of the sanctum. These life-size figures are so life-like that they appear ready to step off the ledge and greet you. The jewellery-bedecked, voluptuous females have elaborate hairdos and are believed to be images not of goddesses, but of the era's nobility. When we reached Madurai – the endpoint of our odyssey – the charming Meenakshi Temple's columns were all lavishly decorated with marvellous sculptures and its walls with bas-reliefs and frescoes.

From awesome temple architecture to the less grandiose: near Chennai we visited a complex named DakshinaChitra, a centre for living traditions where the architecture of South India is on display. Entire houses from different areas have been painstakingly dismantled and rebuilt here. In Pondicherry we saw villas built in both the French and the Franco-Tamil styles, while Chettinad provided a glimpse into the past grandeur of the Chettiars (a dominant South Indian clan known for trade and finance skills). Their astonishing mansions were fascinating examples of domestic architecture. Although the food was excellent throughout the trip, it was in Pondicherry and Chettinad that we had the most memorable gastronomic experiences. In the former it was French cuisine, in the latter we were treated to the most delicious South Indian food I had ever tasted.

It was not just food, architecture and sculpture that we feasted on, however – it was history too. In Pondicherry, Pia had arranged a meeting with a renowned historian, Abraham Eraly, whose books on India's history are highly regarded. His erudite observations and comments gave us insights into both the ancient and more modern history of India. Back in Chennai we were taken on a history trail tracing the arrival and establishment of Christianity in this city.

This Study Tour provided such an amazing wealth and depth of experience that by the time I arrived back in Singapore I was ready for a second trip to the Coromandel Coast -- just to digest all I'd learned.

---

**Andra Leo** is a long-time resident of Singapore who enjoys travelling and writing about her travels. She has co-organised an FOM Study Tour to Bhutan and is Print Production Manager for PASSAGE.

---

Photos by the author