

Classic South India: Tamil Nadu's Coromandel Coast

On this trip, we will fly into Chennai (formerly Madras), capital city of Tamil Nadu, overlooking the Bay of Bengal, and start our explorations at nearby coastal Mahabalipuram, world famous for its 7th-8th c. Pallava Dynasty granite structures.



Here we will see astonishing rock-cut temples and carvings, including the iconic Descent of the Ganges (or Arjuna's Penance) tableau, and the beachside Ratha and Shore Temples, enigmatic early models for later South Indian temples. We will visit Kanchipuram, one of India's seven ancient sacred cities, hallowed for its many early temples and also for its exquisite silk weaving, of lustrous "Kanjeevaram" saris.



Next, we will arrive at the quaint port town of Pondicherry, a French colony till 1954, where we will marvel at the unique blend of French and Tamil architecture, cuisine and culture, and learn about painstaking recent restoration efforts by local experts.

The peaceful Sri Aurobindo Ashram in town and impressive utopian community of Auroville just outside Pondicherry will provide us with spiritual insight, throwing light on India's great heritage of philosophy and transformation of the spirit.



Then it's on to the famous, evocative Chola temples of Chidambaram, Darasuram and Thanjavur, the most magnificent of all - to gaze at finest examples of vast temple architecture - soaring

gates and spires, and to know more about the great God Shiva's cosmic tandava dance through stunning stone sculptures. We will watch skillful bronze-makers creating refined metal images that have fascinated all since Chola times and which are to be found in personal and museum collections worldwide. We will also make a brief stop at the old Danish outpost of Tranquebar (Tharambangadi), and visit Nagapattinam, for its famous Nagore Dargah shrine and Velankanni Church – a region from where earliest Tamil immigrants came to Southeast Asia and Singapore, bringing with them their unique traditions and diverse beliefs.

In Chettinad, home of the affluent merchant-financier Chettiars who made fortunes in trading and money-lending businesses in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, we will visit their lavish marble and teak mansions built in the last few centuries, while staying at the house of a grand lady who has written the proverbial books on Chettiar heritage and cuisine. Moving on to the ancient Pandya capital of Madurai, we will visit the beautiful fish-eyed Goddess Meenakshi's marvelous temple, with its hall of a thousand musical pillars – venue of the annual, elaborate re-enactment of her wedding to Shiva as Shri Sundareshwar, “the handsome one”. Back in Chennai, we will visit the colonial Fort St. George, and learn about Christianity in Tamil Nadu by visiting two earliest churches, including the spots where the first century apostle St. Thomas is believed to have achieved martyrdom and where his tomb lies. A visit to the excellent Chennai Museum with its Amravati reliefs and Chola sculptures, and to choice retail stores will round off this classic tour to the south of India.

