



## A SEA CHANGE

*Charukesi Ramadurai forgoes the charm of Puducherry to discover uncharted mangroves and a quaint seaside town with singing waves*

Puducherry, I know well. I have walked its streets often enough in the past, listening to the unique patois of French and Tamil used by locals. I have deliberated over whether to follow the alluring smell of fresh croissants at Baker Street or masala dosa at India Coffee House. And whether to wash it down with French press coffee in a tall mug or frothy filter kapi in a steel tumbler.

This time, though, I am using Puducherry only as a first stop in my exploration of the region.

Heading south towards Tharangambadi (formerly Tranquebar), an unassuming seaside town just a couple of hours from Puducherry, my husband and I take a short detour to Pichavaram. The second largest mangroves system in India is literally off the beaten track, seeing less than a hundred visitors every day. The pier is practically empty when we reach, just a dozen boatmen patiently awaiting their turn. We get into a paddleboat for a two-hour tour of the mangroves, with the boatman Rajan doubling as a guide.

The Pichavaram mangroves are spread over 3,000 acres and comprise a complex network of 4,400 canals, which eventually join the Bay of Bengal. We glide silently through a small part of

it, ducking every now and then to avoid the branches of trees that have taken over this space as their own.

Other than Rajan's raspy voice piping up occasionally about the ecosystem of the mangroves, and the gentle splash of his oars, there is no other noise. And apart from the natural blues and greens of the mangroves, there is nothing else in sight. Not even another boat. I remember reading that over 200 species of birds have been observed within this forest alone, including cormorants, egrets, spoonbills, storks, and pelicans. But on this sultry afternoon, the avian inhabitants of the place seem to have gone into hiding, perhaps seeking respite from the heat.

All too soon the tour ends, and it is time for us to head on to where a tiny slice of Denmark awaits.

Tharangambadi was a Danish settlement from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, till the British took over in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Danish East India Company, created in 1616 under King Christian IV specifically for trade with India and Ceylon, had fetched up in the coast of Tharangambadi, lured by the heady scents of pepper and cardamom. The spices are long gone, but the stories linger in the salty air.

The Dansborg Fort, the main trading hub of the Danes, still stands on the





In a nod to local belief, these boats have images of gods and the evil eye painted on one end—a talisman to protect them from the wrath of the sea



(Clockwise from top left) Venturing into the mangroves; the Tharangambadi beach; a street in Puducherry; the Dansborg Fort; a boat at sea; Pichavaram.



shore, partly in ruin. The museum on the upper level is my first stop in town, a good hour's worth of browsing through interesting artefacts, including a carefully preserved copy of the sale deed between the Danes and the British, historical maps, a collection of miniature Danish ships that first docked at Tharangambadi, and porcelain and glass objects from the period.

I soon discover there is a bit of European history in every nook and corner of Tharangambadi. In fact, The Bungalow On The Beach, the boutique hotel where I'm staying, right next to the fort, was once the British Collector's residence. It was restored into its current shape by the Neemrana Hotels, keeping the original architectural elements intact, each room named after a Danish ship.

A quick walk of the neat road lattices reveals that this is more an overgrown village than a town. I walk all the way to the main entry, the Landporten, built originally in 1660 by the Danes and now restored. The main lanes of Tharangambadi are quiet, with only a few people out and about on bicycles. I cross a couple of churches, both empty at the time of the evening, also dating back to those times—the Zion Church (the oldest Protestant Church in India), and the New Jerusalem Church, built later by German missionaries Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Pluetschau, who introduced the printing press and translated the Bible into the local language Tamil.

When I get out of the fort for an exploratory stroll of the town, the beach is bustling with activity. I try to make conversation with a few of the taciturn fishermen getting their nets and boats ready for their foray into the sea early the next morning. In an interesting nod to local belief, these colourful boats have images of gods and the evil eye painted on one end—a talisman to protect them from the wrath of the sea.

And in this part of the world, the locals do have good reason to fear the sea; memories of the 2004 tsunami that turned their lives upside down (killing over 800) are still painful. "The sea is our mother, but when she gets angry, we are helpless," says one of the fishermen I speak with.

However, I find the sea at Tharangambadi nothing but comforting, even when it begins to pelt with rain. Back on the verandah outside our room in the hotel, we settle down with a cup of tea to watch the waves pounding the shore. In fact, it is this ceaseless, rhythmic noise that lulls me to sleep later in the night.

And it also serves as an apt reminder that the local name of this town is Tharangambadi, or 'land of the singing waves.' ■