

A

BELLE OF INDIA



B

The aroma of spices wafts from elegant historic buildings in Pondicherry, a slice of France in south India. **CHARUKESI RAMUDURAI** uncovers the once-sleepy town's new vibrance.

A A touch from an elephant's trunk is seen as a symbol of blessing.

B La Villa is one of the many stylish, modern hotels housed in historic colonial buildings.



If there is any doubt that Pondicherry marches to its own beat, consider this. While all of India marks Independence Day on August 15, the city (officially Puducherry and locally PONDY) celebrates it the following day. For it was on August 16, 1962 – more than seven years after France surrendered this territory back to India – that Pondicherry legally merged into the Indian union.

And on July 14, the city reaffirms its affinity with France by celebrating Bastille Day, also known as the French National Day, with parades and fireworks. This city was, after all, a French colony for a couple of centuries and has seen the Portuguese, Dutch and Danes – who used it as a trading port – come and go.

While French may be the official language in Pondicherry, the patois on the street is undoubtedly Tamil. This juxtaposition of cultures is evident on the quaint cobbled streets laid out in neat grids – many have both French and Tamil names, making it confusing for new visitors.

The colourful Manakula Vinayagar temple (manakulavinayagartemple.com) is cloaked in intricate carvings of deities, with the fragrance of camphor and ➔

C One may mistake Pondicherry for a French town, if not for the auto rickshaws and locals in traditional garb.

D Stucco carvings of Hindu deities adorn the facade of Manakula Vinayagar temple.

jasmine, and the sounds of temple bells and prayers lingering in the air.

Just around the corner, you will find a contrasting European colonial building. The minimalist white and powder-grey structure is home to Sri Aurobindo Ashram (sriurobindoashram.org), where no offerings are accepted (not even flowers), only silent meditation. The ashram, a place for spiritual retreat founded by Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo and French spiritual leader Mirra Alfassa, spells serenity and stillness in an already peaceful Pondy.

While the city is usually quiet and idyllic, it becomes lively during its many festivals. These include the International Yoga Festival in January, with workshops and competitions for yogis of all ages.



E Locals sip strong brews at an old-school coffee bar.

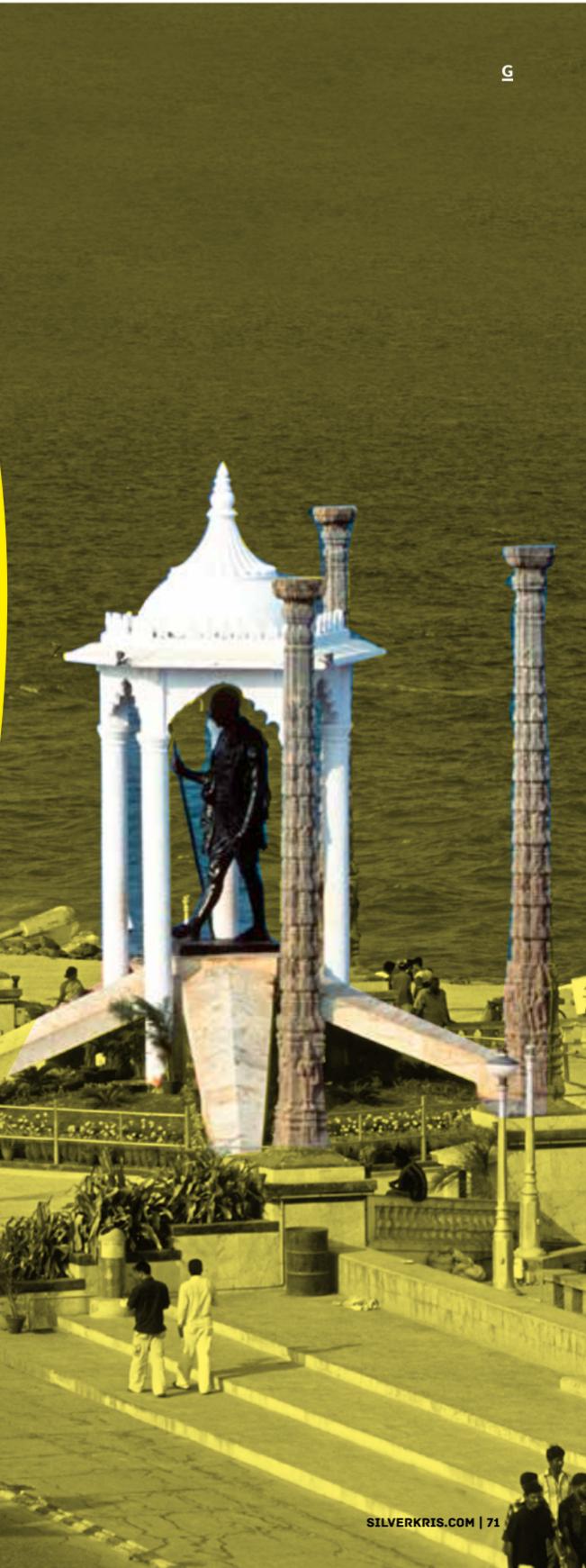
F Photos of French spiritual leader Mirra Alfassa and Sri Aurobindo at a meditation hall in the city.

G A larger-than-life statue of Mahatma Gandhi presides over Goubert Avenue.

YOUNG AT (HE)ART

While imbued with a rich, long heritage, Pondicherry is anything but fusty. The town throbs with a youthful, creative pulse. On one end of the breezy beach promenade on Goubert Avenue – lined with vendors selling cotton candy, spicy fritters and ice cream – the town's young crowd congregates at Le Cafe for coffee, sandwiches and views of waves buffeting the shore.

The beach, facing the Bay of Bengal, also hosts the 16-day Pondy Photo Festival (pondyphoto.com) at a disused warehouse in the city's Old Port. This year's event revolves around the theme of water, with exhibitions, workshops and talks running from August 27. The festival is part of the larger Pondy Art initiative (pondyart.org), which aims to raise public awareness of the challenges faced by India, through vibrant performances and huge artworks splashed across street walls. ➔



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H Stunning paintings can be found on street walls and in other unlikely places as part of the Pondy Art initiative.

TASTING THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

At the risk of being too literal, perhaps the best way to taste Pondy's multicultural flavours is through its dining scene.

Mornings can begin with fresh, flaky croissants and French-pressed coffee from the French-owned Baker Street (baker-street.co.in). Alternatively, kick-start your day South Indian style with a cup of strong filter kapi (coffee) at Surguru Restaurant (hotelsurguru.com) and a crisp dosa (savoury crepe made with rice and lentils).

Pondicherrian cuisine, best described as Franco-Tamil, marries ingredients like tamarind, coconut and pepper with the more subtle rosemary, thyme and basil.

Carte Blanche, the courtyard restaurant at Hotel de l'Orient (a charming French mansion with arched doorways and pretty balconies; neemranahotels.com), does this well. Its mildly spiced white chicken curry and succulent mutton chops kebab, battered and deep-fried, are especially good.

Describing the origin of this cuisine, Arun Elangovan, manager at Neemrana Hotels, says, "When the French ran out of their own ingredients, they started using local ones in their dishes, and a new cuisine was born. They cooked without the spice levels associated with Indian food, using coconut, for instance, to reduce the piquancy of pepper."

PONDY'S JOIE DE VIVRE

LALIT VERMA, owner of Aurodhan art gallery and guesthouse, on where to enjoy the delights of the city.

STYLISH HANGOUT

French colonial decor, lovely service and a central location make Palais de Mahe (cgearth.com/palaisdemahe) my hotel of choice in Pondicherry. I love the seafood from its Mahe de Malabar restaurant, which combines Keralan and French flavours.

GOING ORGANIC

You can find the freshest organic food at Tanto (Auroville Main Road, Tel: 91 413 262 2368). I love its wood-fired pizza that's made in front of you. It's a fusion of European and Indian tastes.

For unique eco-friendly products for the home, I like Janaki (janaki.org.in). It sells items ranging from candles to beautifully designed clothes and jewellery for women.

CULTURAL CENTRE

For events that focus on French and Indian theatre, music and film, I head to Alliance Francaise (pondichery.afindia.org). At its invitation, foreign theatre companies, like the experiential Theatre du Soleil, have staged productions in the city.



Indeed, a new generation of creative individuals, both Indian and foreign, are adding colour and character to Pondicherry, with their hip businesses putting a clever spin on tradition.

Sultry afternoons are best for browsing such homegrown products. These include incense sticks, candles, soaps and silks at the stylish Kalki boutique (maroma.com). Or shop for pretty paper products like notebooks and lanterns at Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper Factory (sriurobindopaper.com), where visitors can watch the transformation from pulp to paper – silk-screened or hand-marbled into beautiful sheets.

! Luxurious scarves and accessories at Janaki.

J Cafe des Arts has a quaint little shop selling funky, locally designed clothes.

K Savour vegetarian dishes at Kasha Ki Aasha.



A BOHEMIAN TOUCH

Pondy makes up for its lack of nightlife with cosy cafes on every corner. Kasha Ki Aasha (kkaashapondy.com), with its boutique selling handmade handicrafts on the ground floor, is inviting enough for one to spend evenings – or even an entire day – at its vegetarian rooftop cafe. Order a cup of masala tea and perhaps a black-bean burger.

Its owner Kasha Vande, is an American who has called Pondy home since 2002. "I love how this big city has that small-town feeling – full of little, friendly neighbourhoods, each with its special characteristics," she says.

At Cafe des Arts (10 Rue Suffren, Tel: 91 99 9448 1914), try a glass of refreshing hibiscus juice and pick up funky, locally designed jewellery and clothes with fun prints. Don't be too surprised by the rickshaw parked in the middle of its small lawn; it just adds to the store's quirky ambience. ➔

L Enjoy views of the city from Le Hidesign cafe.

M Quirky paintings are found throughout boutique hotel Villa Shanti.

Clearly, the mixed retail and dining concept is big in Pondicherry. One of the trendiest cafe-cum-boutiques is Le Hidesign (hidesign.com), a local brand that has gone global. Its flagship store distracts with a dizzying array of leather products as visitors make their way to the cafe on the top floor. With a beer or hot chocolate in hand, you can admire the twinkling lights of the shopping streets below from this lovely spot.

A particularly cheerful place to sip on a cocktail is the courtyard cafe-bar at Villa Shanti (lavillashanti.com). With its soothing white decor, punctuated by quirky art, this 19th-century building restored by two French architects is also one of the best places to stay.

In recent times, Pondy has become a popular hub for surfing and diving. It's one of the few places in India with pristine coral reefs and stunning marine life. The Kallialay Surf School (surfschoolindia.com), set up in 2009 by Spanish brothers Juan and Samai Reboul, trains both beginners and advanced surfers. Its annual surfing competition has attracted more than 60 surfers from across the world each year, creating waves – literally – much like today's Pondicherry itself. ■



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Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Indian Rupee
US\$1 = 67.22INR

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit indianvisaonline.gov.in for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
Pondicherry is an all-weather destination, but it is prudent to avoid the period between April and July, when it is scorching.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines flies 7 times weekly from Singapore to Chennai, from where Pondicherry is about a three-hour drive.

MORE INFORMATION
pondytourism.in