

## Travel

# Chennai

Chennai, India's oft overlooked fourth largest city, is the perfect destination for a bite-sized introduction to the Subcontinent. Words and images *Kate McAuley*



*The organised chaos of a city centre street*

It's difficult to go to India for the first time without preconceived ideas of what it's going to be like – so awash with Subcontinental culture the world, and Dubai in particular, has become. It seems that everyone has tried yoga, knows all about Ayurveda and loves curry. We're aware, almost by osmosis, that the cities are bustling metropolises with ramshackle streets, decadent colonial buildings and Hindu temples. Cricket is adored, poverty is endemic as is extreme wealth. This is what comes to mind as I take an ancient Ambassador taxi to a hotel in the south-eastern city of Chennai. The sun is just starting to peek over the horizon, and although I've never been to India before, it all feels overwhelmingly familiar.

Chennai, also known as Madras (the Indian government changed the name in 1997), is not the first port of call for most tourists visiting southern India. The majority prefer to flock to the beaches of Goa, the canals of Kerala or even the vibrant street life of Mumbai. But it's in India's fourth largest city, known for its automobile production and blossoming movie-making and information technology industries, that I happily find myself.

The day begins in the relative comfort of the air-conditioned minibus that is ferrying me and a few other sightseers about the city. From this cocoon, I gape at the goings on buzzing around us. All kinds of vehicular transport jostle for position on the roads, upon which there is a definite hierarchy – trucks have precedence over cars, which are far superior to the ever-present bright yellow auto-rickshaws, which, in turn, don't have the time of day for motorbikes and bicycles. On foot you're the lowest common denominator. Cows are the only anomaly. These sacred bovines, cherished for their never-ending supply of nourishment, force all traffic to swerve, as they regally amble along city centre thoroughfares, decorated horns akimbo.

On street corners, women of all ages, bound in colourful saris with their long hair braided down their backs, perch cross-legged in the hot and humid weather, knotting jasmine buds and roses into long strands. Men are labouring on building sites or selling everything from kitchenware to souvenirs – their merchandise carefully laid out on gaudy strips of cloth. Children make use of every available open space to play pick-up cricket games. Brightly painted ads and bill posters, writ-

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ten in both beautiful Tamil squiggles and English, are plastered on every wall.

Our guide tells us that 'we will see a few buildings of the Britishes' on our day-long whistle-stop tour. This turns out to be quite the understatement. Nearly all the city-centre buildings are European, if not British, in origin. Most are crumbling vestiges that now house tiny offices, private language schools and restaurants. A ubiquity of church steeples also dot the horizon. My guess, though, is that Pari ('like the city') was referring to buildings such as the majestic **Central Station** (Periyar High Road), that looks as though it was ripped off a central London street and then painted red for some unknown reason. **Fort St George** (Kamarajar Salai, +91 2567 0389), which was built around 1653 by the British East India Company and now houses the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly, and the Indo-Saracenic architecture of the **High Court** (NSC Bose Road) are other examples of the well-maintained colonial buildings that tattoo the city.

It's the Indian-designed Hindu temples, however, that really catch my eye. Near **Kapaleeshwarar Temple** (Kutchery Road) we are allowed out of the bus. The heat and humidity are intense and the noise cacophonous. The smell, a pungent mix of spice, incense, coconut oil and car fumes, hangs heavy in the air. The shrine stoically rises up from the street to a pyramided peak. The glossy icons of Hindu deities and their divine side-kicks, which have been hanging from the edges since it was built in the eighth century, stare down at us. There's Shiva, the destroyer deity to whom this temple is dedicated, and his son Ganesha, with his huggable round belly and elephant's head, to name just two of the uncountable.

Further Hindu relics are just a hop, skip and a jump (well, a one-hour bus ride) from Chennai, as I discover the following day. **Mamallapuram**, an amiable seaside town and World Heritage site, is sprinkled with ancient stone carvings. The **Shore Temple** (Beach Road), built in the seventh century, stands regally and surveys the Bay of Bengal, while the **Five Rathas** (Five Rathas Road), five monolithic carvings that represent five chariots, are close by (Rs230/Dhs20 combined entry for both). But it's the **Arjuna's Penance** (West Raja Street, free) that really holds my attention. This huge bas relief, the world's largest, depicts a pair of pachyderms against a backdrop of deities, other animals and divine beings. Arguments rage over its actual meaning, but to most tourists it doesn't matter. The self-effacing nature of the carvings and use of the natural fissures in the rock face to create depth and meaning (no matter how mysterious) are original and beautiful.

From Mamallapuram we make our way further south to **Pondicherry** where I'm brought back to colonial times. This French-kissed town is uncannily reminiscent of New Orleans (*sans le jazz, bien sûr*), with its balmy weather, long stretches of coastline, tree-wrinkled avenues (with names like Rue Suffren), Gallic architecture and boutique hotels. It is, however, still very much an Indian town, as a visit to the **Sri Aurobindo Ashram** (Rangapillai Street, +91 413 223 3604, free) attests. Silently and barefooted, as the signs necessitate, I enter the building and watch people from all walks of life bow and meditate before the altar of the ashram's founders Sri



*The YMCA at home in a crumbling colonial building*

Aurobindo and a French woman known only as 'The Mother'. To be frank, I'm left feeling a little disconcerted, which quickly turns into bewilderment when we visit the nearby community of **Auroville** ([www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org)).

Before visiting Auroville, the brainchild of 'The Mother', I had the vague notion it was a commune and expected to see hordes of dreadlocked hippies working in fields and sleeping in wooden makeshift huts. In actual fact, it's a well organised community, with obvious funds and the aim to be 'an ideal township devoted to an experiment in human unity'. Around 1,700 people live here from 35 different countries, and they all meditate in the **Matrimandir** – a huge golden temple shaped like a distended golf ball. It's here that a serene-looking custodian asks me where I'm from. 'Australia,' I reply. His face lights up. 'I need you to answer a very important question.' He draws my six-foot frame down to his five-foot level and whispers, 'are kangaroos edible?' 'Yes,' I reply. He thanks me then promptly asks me to leave as visiting hours are over. As I shuffle through the red dust to the exit, I ponder the question and come to the dawning realisation that the community might be looking for an alternative environmentally-friendly food source. I fear the worst. Have I just condemned thousands of common greys to certain death in Southern India?

On the way back to the hotel, the sun disappears behind the horizon, and Pari and the other tourists fall asleep, giving me a chance to reflect on the past couple of days. Gone is the feeling of overwhelming familiarity. Certainly, most of the elements I expected were apparent during my trip, but in context, India is a far richer, varied, intoxicating and ultimately surprising nation – so much more than the sum of its preconceived parts. And Chennai and its surrounds has given me the perfect introduction to a country that I hope to visit again soon, despite how many marsupials I inadvertently harm in the process. ●



*Kapaleeshwarar Temple's deity-clad roof*

## Essentials

### Getting there

**Qatar Airways** (04 221 4210, [www.qatarairways.com](http://www.qatarairways.com)) flies to Chennai daily via Doha. Prices start at Dhs2,110.

### Where to stay

The **Taj Coromandel** and the **Taj Fisherman's Cove** ([www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com)) both offer affordable luxury.

### Where to eat

There are loads of great places to eat, but here are our favourites. For a bite on a budget, head to **Amaravathi** (Alwarpet, +91 44 2811 6416) or **Karakudi** (Mylapore, +91 44 2811 1893). If your rupees grow on trees, try **Southern Spice** (Taj Coromandel).

### Getting around

The heat, humidity and hassle make walking troublesome. For short distances hire an auto-rickshaw or a taxi, but make sure you agree on a price first. For organised tours contact the Indian Tourist Board at [www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org).

### Currency

**Dhs1 = Rs11.67**