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Attending one of the biggest celebrations in Madurai, the Chithirai Festival of celestial wedding of Lord Shiva and Goddess Meenakshi left Mark in awe. He was fascinated to see the devotion and dedication of devotees as they were pulling the chariots with deities statues to Meenakshi Temple for the dormition ceremony in evening. The Chithirai Festival is a great opportunity to experience local life in Madurai and see a traditional Hindu wedding ritual!

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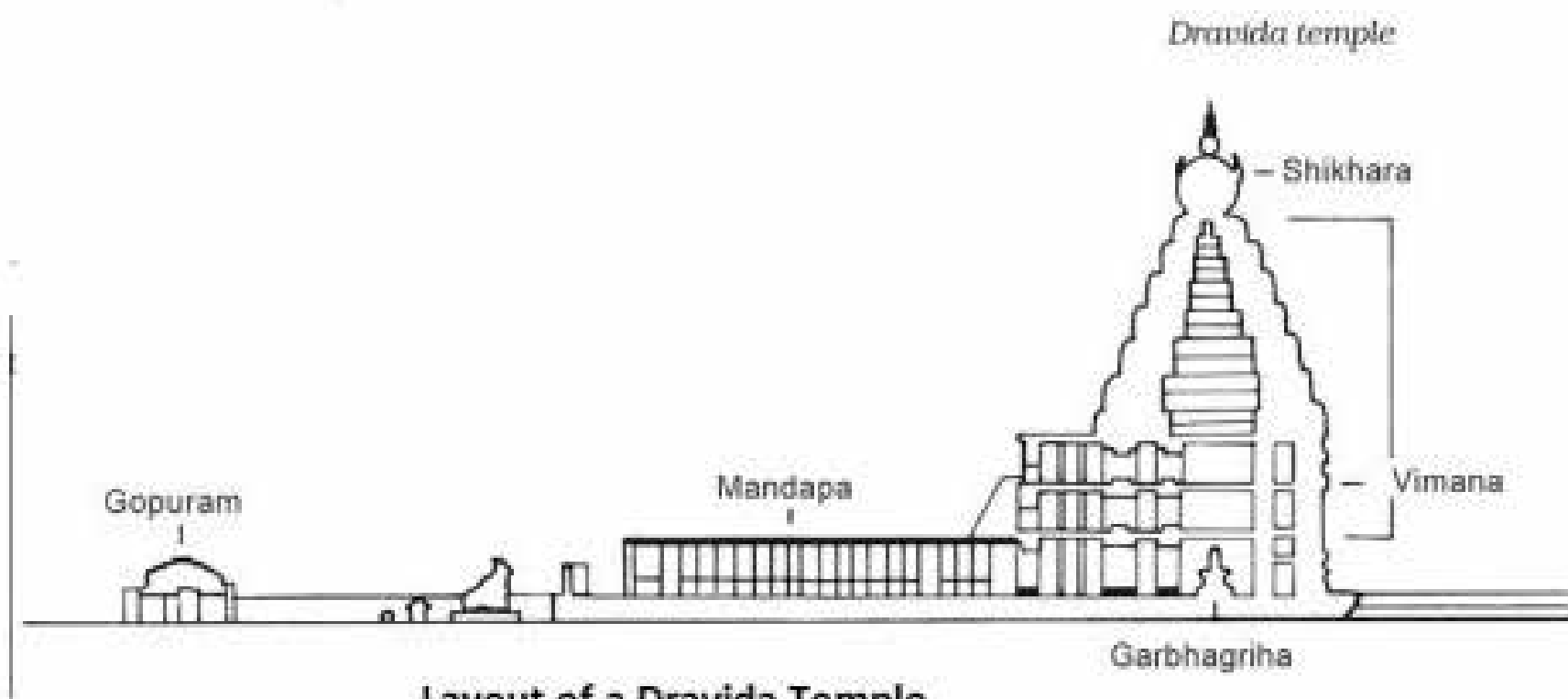
A GLIMPSE OF THE CELESTIAL CEREMONY!

Location: Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai



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Layout of a Dravida Temple

SOUTH INDIA'S MASTERPIECES: THE DRAVIDIAN STYLE OF TEMPLES!

If travelling profoundly fascinates you, the southern part of India is one of those places that can't be missed, be it delicious cuisine to discovering a culturally intriguing way of life, it will never disappoint you in finding amazing experiences. Tamil Nadu has always been the citadel of secrets of ancient temples and a veritable keeper of cultural nuances of the state. The state is adored for its myriad experiences! The timeless temples of the state of Tamil Nadu dominates with its ancient towering Dravidian masterpieces that often have vibrant painted sculptures on their towers, also called as Gopurams. The Dravidian style of temple architecture is said to be the oldest form of architecture. It was deployed for Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu from the 7th to 18th century, characterized by its pyramidal tower. The Shikhara, the crowing head of the temple, is one of the major highlight of the structure that symbolises the connection between devotees and the divine. We have handpicked some of the best temples to explore that are worth a traveller's while!

Shore Temple – Mahabalipuram

The Dravidian architectural-styled temple is sheer poetry in stone. The 8th century temple is the pinnacle of architectural elegance of the Pallava period in history. The twin tiered gopuram can be seen well before you actually reach the temple. Built by King Narasimhavarman II this temple is one of the earliest freestanding stone temples in Tamil Nadu. Thousands of small and big sculptures of Shiva adorn the stone walls of the temple and its courtyard.

Brihadeeswara Temple - Thanjavur

Another Dravidian masterpiece! The powerful Cholas built more than 70 temples in Thanjavur, with the most outstanding one being the Brihadeeswara Temple. This World Heritage Site was built by Rajaraja I, also known as the 'king of kings'. He built the incredible Brihadeeswara Temple between 1003 and 1010. The temple is known for its grand architecture and sheer size – a true representation of the Chola

aesthetics and skills. It is recommended to visit two times (morning and evening) to catch the beauty and play of light on the temple – cool mornings and the hot reds and oranges in the evening. It is the entrance of the temple that stays etched in the memory for long.

Ramanathaswamy Temple – Rameshwaram

A beautiful example of Dravidian architectural style, Ramanathaswamy Temple is a must visit! The highlight of the temple is its astonishing pillared hallway, regarded as the longest in India, lining its perimeter. The seemingly endless rows of carved and beautiful pillars have a mesmerizing painted ceiling. The temple is located only 100 meters from the sea (Agni Theertham) and pilgrims take a bath there first, before going inside the temple and bathing in its 22 wells. The water is considered to be holy and purifying to mind and body.

Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple – Tiruchirappalli

Tiruchirappalli is home to the largest temple in India - the Sri Ranganathaswamy temple on Srirangam Island. One of the Dravidian wonders, the temple is dedicated to a reclining form of Lord Vishnu, although only Hindus are permitted inside the inner sanctum to see it. The majestic temple dates back 1200 years to the early Chola-era in Tamil Nadu.

Arunachaleswar Temple – Tiruvannamalai

Another alluring Dravidian architecture of Tamil Nadu, Arunachaleswar temple sits at the base of holy Mount Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, around four hours from Chennai. It is one of the largest temple complex in Madurai with nine towers and three inner courtyards. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, he is worshiped here as an element of fire. Devotes flock to the town every full moon to walk around the mountain. Numerous shrines and sadhus (Hindu holy men) can be found along the path. It is one of the must visit temples for its incredible architecture and spiritual aura.

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Chidambaram Vilas - A Luxury Heritage Resort

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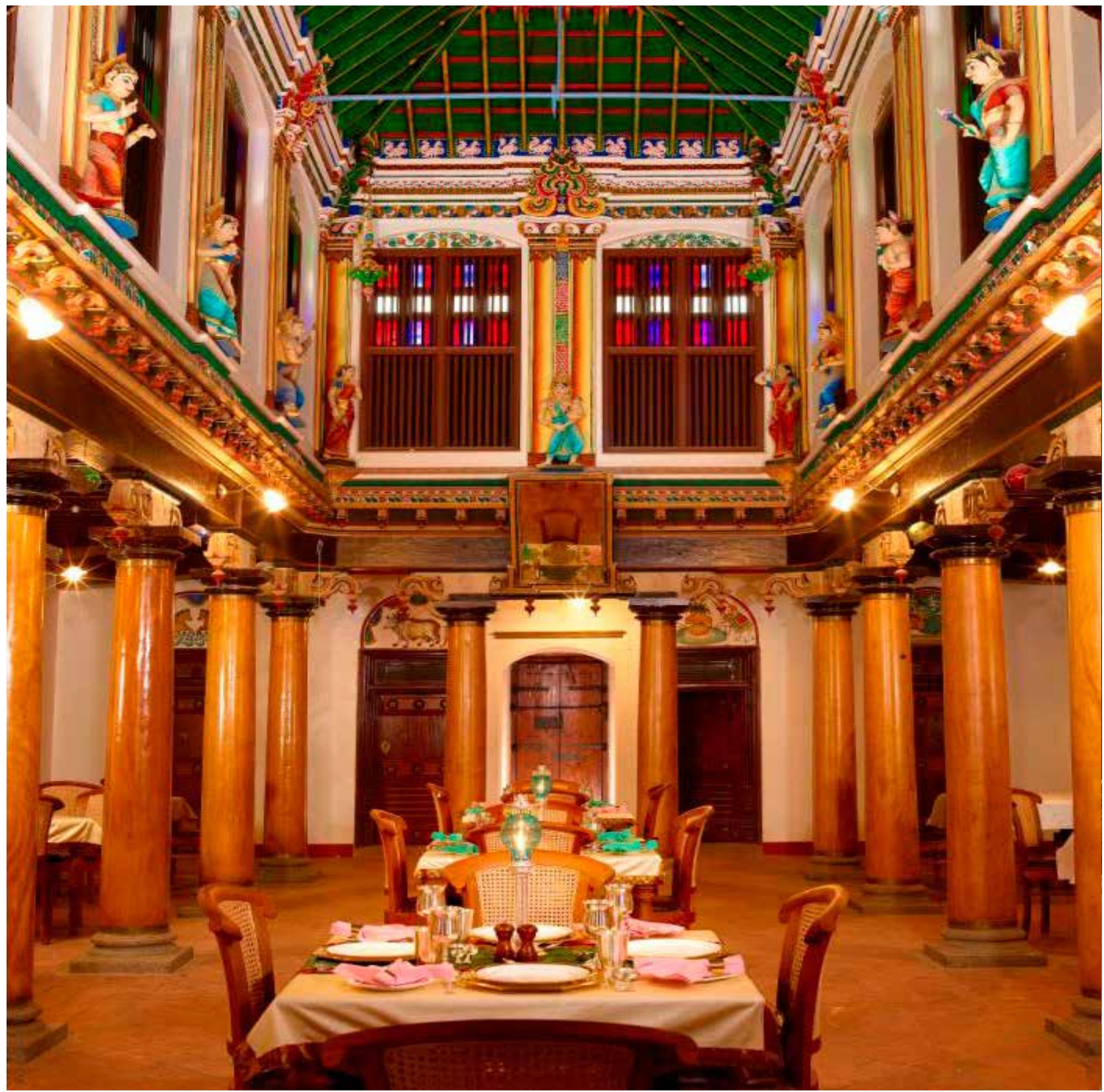


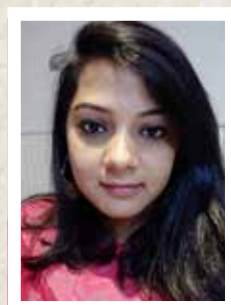
Get hypnotized by the charm of Tamil Nadu's various hues. Be it the art, culture, music, architecture or culinary heritage. A heritage hotel in Chettinad in the historical city of Pudukkottai, Chidambara Vilas showcases the 110 year old Chettinad heritage home that was built by the famous Krishnappa Chettiar Dynasty and is today restored and managed by the Sangam Group. The heritage Chettinad Mansion showcases the luxurious Chettinad lifestyle of the 20th century and features every modern luxury amenity imaginable. It is one of the pioneering examples of the concept of best heritage Chettinad luxury hotel in Karaikudi. The winner of the NDTV Design and Architecture Award, 2014, resort uses vintage format accessories, like the famous 'Athangudi' tiles, wooden paneling and Burmese beamed roofing, Belgium mirrors, chandeliers from Daman and Diu, clocks from France, tiles from Italy and so on. A perfect blend of luxury and heritage, Chidambara Vilas offers an unparalleled experience.

Highlight Includes:

- Heritage essence is retained with local aesthetics.
- Lovingly redesigned 25 luxury heritage rooms and restored to the smallest details.
- The rooms have been subtly enhanced with all luxuries and amenities to offer a personalized experience that gives the best of both worlds, a full century apart.
- Savour the world famous Chettinad cuisine through three unique dining experiences at Chidambara Vilas – Interactive, Experiential and Fine Dining.
- Enjoy a complete Chettinad experience through the custom designed indoor and outdoor activities. Relax in the international standard swimming pool and lounge area within the property.

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KANIKA CHOPRA Footloose in Madurai

Chennai may be the capital of Tamil Nadu, but Madurai is the epitome of vivacity and culture. Tamil-born and Tamil-rooted, Madurai is one of the oldest cities in India and a metropolis that traded with ancient Rome! It is adored for its dazzling maze-like temple structures, astonishing village culture, the delicious Chettinad cuisine, and offbeat places that are only close to Madurai! The timeless temples, the traditional cuisine and the distinct lifestyle are a highlight here. For this edition of the Indo Asia Diary, we have handpicked some offbeat experiences that are worth a traveller's while when in Madurai.

Walk the town of Madurai

Wind through the fascinating colourful and buzzing markets and shops of Madurai. Catch a glimpse of unusual sights, experience the culture of warm people, and discover the local life of the oldest city of South India. Stroll through Chithirai Street as you indulge in the soulful songs played in the background in the temples. Watch as the woman of the house draw Kolam (a traditional Indian art form using rice flour, which is now replaced by synthetic vibrant colours) on their porch early in the morning to welcome happiness and prosperity to home. It's a beautiful sight to witness! Stop



occasionally for tea at the local tea shops as you explore the wholesale markets selling all kinds of things! Choose to end your walk at one of the tallest building in the vicinity to get a panoramic view of Madurai.

An evening at Meenakshi Amman Temple

The city imparts aesthetics of architecture and Meenakshi Amman Temple is worth your while! Known as one of the largest temples in South

India, the Meenakshi -Sundareshwarar Temple has a spectacular architecture with spellbinding murals all around. Take a Rickshaw ride to witness the impeccable experience of the puja ceremony at the magnificent Meenakshi Amman Temple. Visit at sunset for a calming spiritual experience, when the image of the God Shiva is carried from his shrine by temple priests and taken in a chariot procession to the shrine of his wife, Meenakshi. The vibrant event takes place every night with rhythmic chanting, flurry of drums, horns and incense smoke!

Explore Hilltop Shrine at Tiruparakunram for a Panoramic view of Madurai City

Perched at the top of the Tiruparakunram Hill at the outskirts of Madurai City, the well-known dargah (shrine) of Islamic saint Sultan Sikandar Badushah Shaheed. It takes about 600 steps to reach the holy shrine, but when you look at the view, the breathtaking panorama will make it worth every effort. Irrespective of religion, people from all parts of Tamil Nadu and from Kerala visit the dargah, as it is said that many people who come here with a wish in their heart get answered very soon! May be it's the faith or it is the beauty, the place is a must visit around Madurai.

Visit the Aiyyanar Street God of Tamil Nadu

Discover one of the Street Gods of South India! Aiyyanar Temple is dedicated to the pre-Hindu guardian-god Aiyyanar, a Tamil deity – a most popular village God who is said to guard every village in South India. He is often depicted as a well-built warrior and a guardian particularly praised in South India and Sri Lanka. It's an absolute delight to see hundreds of majestic terracotta horses and other beasts – offerings from local families line a jungle-shrouded path leading to a modest altar. The Aiyyanar Temple of Kottur Melavasal Village is

perhaps one of the most off beat places that you could explore around Madurai! During Aiyyanar Temple Festival, the streets of South India are a wonder to explore as it comes to life!

Trails of the city!

It is believed that one of the best way to explore a city's heart is by taking a food trail, and Madurai welcomes you with an amazing chance to plunge into it. Celebrate the delicious cuisine of Madurai



as you take a culinary journey to the paradise that Madurai is. This is the city where Chettinad cuisine is at its best. The Chettinad story here is seen in the rice-based snacks like paniyaram (savoury snack shallow fried in a special mould) and idiyappam (string hoppers), kuzhambu (spicy stew) varieties and a wide repertoire of meat dishes, from chicken and mutton to crab. One of the main properties of local cooking here is that spices are used in abundance and always ground fresh! This is the best place to take a spice trail and discover the aroma of Red chilli, fresh coconut, garlic, tamarind, fenugreek, curry leaves and more, blended perfectly!

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Madhya Pradesh reopens tourist destinations



Madhya Pradesh (MP) has announced the reopening of State Tourism Development Corporation run-hotels, resorts and private

hotels. The state's national parks also opened on 15th June. The region is known for its wildlife hotspots with 11 national parks and 24 wildlife sanctuaries such as Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary and National Chambal Sanctuary. Sanitisation and fumigation of the tourist spots have been undertaken. The tourism board has said that all health, hygiene and safety guidelines have been implemented as per SOP issued by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. Sonia Meena, IAS, additional Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board said, "Madhya Pradesh being into Inbound tourism promotion is very strong with its domestic tourism products and wildlife is one of them. Opening up tourist attractions would also give a sense of "returning to normalcy". "We see great potential after reopening our destinations like wildlife, heritage, pilgrimage, leisure, and adventure tourism opportunities". Initially, the state is looking to attract travellers from neighbouring states, who can make use of the enhanced road connectivity. MP's tourism board has also introduced luxury caravans for travellers who wish to explore the state while minimising physical contact.

Odisha govt plans cruise service to boost tourism potential



The Odisha government plans to organise cruises in selected water bodies of the state with private participation in order

to promote tourism which has been devastated by the Cyclone Fani last year and now the lockdown. The state tourism department has invited proposals from the prospective participants to develop daily cruise service at Chilika Lake, Mahanadi, Bhitarkanika, Satkosia Gorge and Hirakud reservoir. "The last date for submission of proposal is July 10," tweeted Odisha tourism department. Tourism secretary Vishal Kumar Dev told that "We have a long coastline of 482 km, five major rivers, reservoirs and water bodies including Chilika, the largest brackish water lake of Asia. All these water bodies possess tremendous tourism potential. To unlock the potential, the department is planning to develop day cruises in select water bodies of the state with private sector participation."

500-year-old temple found submerged in Odisha's Mahanadi

An ancient temple that remained submerged in Mahanadi in Odisha has been found, said experts who are leading a documentation project of heritage sites in the river valley. The 60-foot temple, believed to be around 500 years old, was located recently during an exercise as part of the project, said Anil Dhir, project coordinator of the Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage

(INTACH) in Odisha. The temple dates back to the late 15th or early 16th century, considering the construction style of the Mastaka and the materials used for the construction, Mr. Dhir said, adding that INTACH would approach the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to take steps for relocating and restoring the temple.

Sri Lanka Tourism presents guidelines to welcome tourists from August 2020



Sri Lanka plans to resume tourism from all countries as of August 1, 2020 and has drafted guidelines to welcome tourists.

Accordingly, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) has presented Sri Lanka Tourism Operational Guidelines with Health Protocols – Version 1 to be followed by all tourism stakeholders. The guidelines have been drafted in consultation with the Ministry of Health, World Health Organization (WHO), and Tourism industry stakeholders. The Sri Lanka Tourism, in line with the guidance received from the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization, have ensured the adoption of right measures to minimize chances of re-entry and/or community spreading of COVID-19 within the country, and to implement those measures in a manner that avoids unnecessary inconvenience to tourists and industry stakeholders. Sri Lanka Tourism Operational Guidelines with Health Protocols – Version 1 can be downloaded [here](#).

Domestic flight ops at Mumbai airport may double to 100 soon



Mumbai could see its schedule domestic flights double from 25 arrivals and as many departures daily to 50 each this week. The

Maha Vikas Aghadi government of Maharashtra had allowed schedule flights to resume from May 25 at that level, given the spiralling cases of coronavirus in the state. But due to heavy demand for travel to and from Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA)—India's second busiest airport after Delhi's IGI —NCP, a coalition partner in the MVA government, has sought at least doubling of flights at the earliest.

"I have spoken to the state government. There is a need to enhance flights in and out of Mumbai. There will be a decision on increasing flights very soon," senior NCP leader Praful Patel told TOI.

Sources say the state government has been requested to allow 100 schedule domestic arrivals and as many departures daily. "In the first step, this number may be raised to 50 each and subsequently to 100 each at CSMIA," a source said.

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India relaxes visa & travel restrictions for foreign businessmen, healthcare professionals



Taking cognizance of the difficulty faced by foreign nationals associated with businesses in India, the Government of India

has decided to relax visa and travel restrictions for foreign businessmen, healthcare professionals, health researchers, engineers and technical specialists. This is a step towards permitting them to come to India. Foreign nationals falling under these categories would have to obtain a fresh Business visa or Employment visa, as applicable, from the Indian Missions/Posts abroad. Those holding a valid long-term multiple entry Business visa [other than B-3 visa for sports] would have to get the Business visa re-validated from the Indian Mission/Post concerned. Such foreign nationals would not be permitted to travel to India on the strength of any electronic visa obtained earlier.

Visitors allowed Entry are:

- Foreign businessmen coming to India on a Business visa (other than on B-3 visa for sports) in non-scheduled commercial/ chartered flights.

- Foreign Healthcare professionals, health researchers, engineers and technicians for technical work at Indian health sector facilities, including laboratories and factories. This is subject to a letter of invitation from a recognized and registered healthcare facility, registered pharmaceutical company or accredited University in India.
- Foreign Engineering, Managerial, Design or other Specialists travelling to India on behalf of foreign business entities located in India. This includes all manufacturing units, design units, software and IT units as well as financial sector companies (banking and non-banking financial sector firms).
- Foreign Technical specialists and engineers travelling for installation, repair and maintenance of foreign-origin machinery and equipment facilities in India, on the invitation of a registered Indian business entity. These could be for equipment installation, or is under warranty, or for after sales servicing or repair on commercial terms.

IndiGo to add new Airbus jets to its fleet despite COVID-19 uncertainty



IndiGo has said that it will keep adding new aircraft to its fleet even though it can't give any firm guidance on future capacity growth because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The airline, the world's biggest customer for Airbus SE's best-selling A320neo jets, plans to return its entire fleet of 120 older, fuel-guzzling planes to lessors

in the next two years, CEO Ronojoy Dutta said in a conference call with analysts and investors after the carrier reported fourth-quarter earnings Tuesday.

Bangladesh to finalize SOP on tourism within a week



Bangladesh is going to set a national SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for tourism sector within a week with a framework over how the travel and leisure industry will maintain health guidelines and social distancing after reopening their business. Currently, Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB), country's national tourism organization (NTO), is preparing the SOP to assure intending tourists about their health safety while touring here after reopening the tourism. "We are working on it, right now we are receiving suggestions from different stakeholders regarding this We will submit our final draft SOP to civil aviation and tourism ministry within one week," BTB's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) M Javed Ahmed told recently. After receiving the draft SOP, the tourism ministry would send it to the Health ministry for their opinion. "The health ministry could keep our SOP untouched or bring amendments to it. After their feedback, we will finally publish the SOP to implement," Ahmed said.

Bangladesh: Sundarbans' eco-tourism expansion planned to attract tourists



In a bid to attract tourists to the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, the government will construct an ecotourism centre with all facilities at a cost of Tk 27.95 crore. Four new tourist spots will also be developed to reduce the pressure on the existing seven spots under a project titled 'expansion and development of eco-tourism facilities' in the Sundarbans, sources in the forest department told recently. Under the project, initiatives will also be taken for the socio-economic development of the people dependent on the Sundarbans to reduce their dependence on forest resources, they said. The forest department in December 2019 submitted the development project profile (DPP) in this regard to the Planning Commission for approval, sources said. As per the DPP, one of the main objectives of the project is to protect the ecology and environment through creating awareness among the local people by expanding eco-friendly tourism facilities in the Sundarbans. Besides creating infrastructure, 600 people of the guide co-management committee including forests officers, employees and eco-tour operators will be trained under the project. Once the project is approved by the Planning Commission, it will be implemented in both west and east Sundarbans by 2022, the sources said.

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It was a pity that ITB and some other major fairs were cancelled this year and we couldn't meet you. With the uncertainty still persisting on the upcoming travel fairs this year, we would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that we are always there for you to be of assistance for the Indian subcontinent i.e. India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Tibet. Please feel free to write to us.

We have absolutely no doubt that when the world reopens and things go back to normal, one of the most desired things will be "To Travel". While, we are in our homes, the boundaries are closed and our clients cannot travel today, but we can always plan for tomorrow. Whenever your guests are ready to start thinking about their next journey, let us assure you that we will be ready to listen, guide, suggest and share our love for the Indian Sub-continent. Our hunger to assist your guests in exploring, this beautiful part of the world, the way they dreamed, will never go away.

We will just say one thing – "Dream Today and Travel Tomorrow".

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Dear Partners,

Life is journey to be experienced, sometimes you have to go places and have encounters with beautiful events and culture to fill your pocket with intriguing stories to remember forever. It was the unique stories of Madurai's history and culture that stayed as one of the most enduring memories of the town in my mind.

There are majorly two prominent cultural centres in South India, one is Madurai and other is Thanjavur. There are many more centres that are equally important such as Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Srirangapatna, or Sarvanamalai, but the crown of significance goes to Madurai and Thanjavur. The city was the seat of the Madurai Nayak Dynasty, which has a fascinating history and Thanjavur, the capital of Cholas Dynasty, also has a long and intriguing past to it.

I vividly remember my visit to Madurai a few decades back as a tourist! What a treat it was to someone who loves the heritage and spiritual tangents of this vast country. Fortunately, I happened to be there on the occasion of a wedding- Chithirai Festival, where Lord Shiva marries Meenakshi. The whole temple was decorated like the house of a bride, what a beautiful sight it was! What impressed me the most was the spirit of devotees, they were celebrating and enjoying as if someone from their family was getting married that day! Such a beautiful devotion, it is rarely found. There was fun and folic, with rituals, traditions, and Pujas in every corner of the huge temple complex. Every nook and corner was lit, everyone were in their best, and happy. What left in awe was the meal that was prepared for everyone, a grand feast was held after the wedding. The huge crowd peacefully waits after the ceremony and eats the served feast as a blessing. Each and every dish is prepared at Meenaskhi Temple itself keeping in mind the King's menu and everyone could eat as much as they wanted to! In my 50 days of trip to South India, I did not have something so lavish and delicious, the lunch & dinner that day was absolutely wondrous. All of this because, Meenakshi was getting married to Shiva.

After a couple of days, I witnessed yet another beautiful ritual, where the deities of the temple were taken in the temple car to a boat at Vandiyur Mariamman Teppakulam for the day to rest. The boat was all decked up with flowers and lamps so beautifully, people were in their Sunday best and the deities were taken to the middle of the lake in a temple and brought back in the evening. Aah! What a sight it was, it's still so vivid, I doubt I have ever seen something so beautiful. I was also fascinated by the Bazaars of Madurai around the temple. They are huge, and are for everything you want. From vegetables, betel nut, to fruits, everything was right there.

Madurai is in the middle of the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu. I must say this, clearly this is not an exaggeration, but if I compare Thanjavur to Madurai, Madurai has my heart. It is an experience to travel to Madurai and explore all this at once, it will overwhelm you and also make you fall in love with the city at the same time.

Sunirmol Ghosh

EMPLOYEE of THE MONTH!



Gopal Kumar | Senior Web Designer

A part of Indo Asia Tour's family for the past 08 years, Gopal is responsible for the website and graphic designing work. One of the most creative and technology loving person, Gopal tackles the multitasking work and complex situations with his cool demeanor and never says no to anything. He loves to spend time with his one-year-old daughter.