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## Peaceful Pondicherry

Discovering seaside bliss along India's Riviera of the East

By Janeen Christoff



The Matrimandir is Auroville's meditation hall. // © 2012 Thinkstock

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The town's slogan is "Peaceful Pondicherry." This certainly resonates with what Pondicherry and its surrounding areas offer visitors — an eclectic mix of cultures and world philosophies. It is often referred to as the "French Riviera of the East," partly because of the fact that it remained a French colony until 1954, long after India gained political freedom.

Pondicherry is a quiet (by Indian standards), well-known beach town located in the southeastern part of the country. Its history spans centuries — possibly as far back as the second century — but, one of Pondicherry's more modern claims to fame is that it was the setting for the bestselling book, "The Life of Pi." Fans of Roald Dahl's famous children's book, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," might also recall that Prince Pondicherry requested that Willie Wonka build a chocolate palace in India, which subsequently melted in the hot sun.

Visitors to the area will marvel at the beautiful colonial buildings, churches and statues throughout the region, and beaches are another of Pondicherry's main attractions. Noteworthy sights include Mahatma Gandhi's statue on the Beach Promenade, the Sacred Heart Jesus Church and the Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple.

Another draw in the area is the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, a well-known ashram in India. Devotees from India and all over the world flock

here for spiritual salvation — and as expected — during my visit, there was a substantial line at the entrance. The ashram's spiritual foundations are a blend of yoga and modern science that were founded in 1926 by Sri Aurobindo Ghose, an Indian freedom fighter, poet, philosopher and yogi. Guests can tour the main building of the temple freely during visiting hours, but those who would like to participate in meditations and dining rituals will need a special pass, which can be obtained by contacting the ashram. Private tours can also be arranged.

Not far away is the Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple. The temple was in existence before the French settled in Pondicherry and welcomes visitors who can provide donations to the temple elephant, a favorite activity for many.

A stop at Auroville is also a good suggestion for visitors with some extra time and an open mind. The experimental township is a short drive northwest of Pondicherry off the East Coast Road. The township was founded by Mirra Richard, who is known as "The Mother" and who was also the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. Auroville is meant to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The township was designed by French architect, Roger Anger, and the community is devoted to the realization of human unity. In the middle of the town resides the Matrimandir, a symbol of what residents believe to be the "Universal Mother."

Although originally intended to house 50,000 people, the actual population is, currently, around 2,000 adults and minors who come from 44 different nations, approximately 830 of whom are of Indian origin. The community is divided into neighborhoods with English, Sanskrit, French and Tamil names such as Aspiration, Arati, La Ferme and Isaiambalam. Residents are involved in agriculture, administration, commerce, handicrafts, alternative technology, education, healthcare and development projects that include AuroRE Systems, an international, award-winning unit that is involved in solar photovoltaic and thermal systems.

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## A Guide to the Area

### Getting There

Arriving in Pondicherry is relatively easy. The city is located about 100 miles from Chennai and is easily reachable by car, taxi or rail service. The area can be included as a day trip for clients staying in Chennai, but there are hotels in the area that cater to Western visitors. For those who are more spiritually inclined, a stay in a guesthouse can be arranged through the ashram or Auroville.

### New & Noteworthy

#### Air India Resumes Direct Service

Air India has resumed service to Mumbai from Newark Airport. The carrier will also resume nonstop service from JFK and Chicago to Delhi effective Sept. 5. As in the past, flights from Newark to Mumbai will continue to Ahmedabad and JFK/Delhi flights will continue to Mumbai. Chicago/Delhi flights will continue to Hyderabad. Connecting service is available via Air India at Delhi and Mumbai to cities across India.

Air India pays 4 percent commission on all international tickets sold in the U.S. [www.airindia.in](http://www.airindia.in)

#### Leela Honored by Robb Report

The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts' newest flagship, The Leela Palace New Delhi, was named to Robb Report's "Best of the Best" Hotels 2012.

"Building a modern Palace hotel in the heart of India's capital city was a dream come true for me. My two sons – Vivek and Dinesh – and I are proud to have created the only hotel in India now recognized as one of the world's best," said Capt. C.P. Krishnan Nair, chairman and founder of The Leela Palaces Hotels and Resorts.

The Leela Palace, which opened last year, offers some of the largest guestrooms in the city; two internationally acclaimed restaurants – Le Cirque and Megu – an Espa spa and an infinity-edge, rooftop swimming pool. [www.theleela.com](http://www.theleela.com)

#### Friendly Planet Travel Offers New Tour

Friendly Planet Travel is offering a new India tour this fall. Clients can experience India on the nine-day Taj Mahal Express itinerary. Over the course of the trip, clients will journey through India's Golden Triangle and have the chance to explore more than 17 sights in India, including the Taj Mahal, the Pink City of Jaipur, Delhi and more.

The tour includes roundtrip airfare from New York (JFK), all ground transportation and transfers, accommodations in superior, first-class and deluxe hotels, a daily breakfast buffet and a farewell dinner, a comprehensive touring program, including entrance fees and professional, English-speaking guides.

The tour is available for \$1,599 per person, departing Sept. 18. Travelers can also depart on Oct. 9 for \$1,899 and Nov. 13 for \$1,999. [www.friendlyplanettravel.com](http://www.friendlyplanettravel.com)

### Hotel Packages

#### Discounted Rates at the Doubletree Goa

Hilton Worldwide has opened the newly renovated, full-service DoubleTree by Hilton Goa-Arpora-Baga, the third DoubleTree by Hilton hotel in India. Ensnconced in a quiet setting, the 104-room hotel is centrally located a few miles from the Baga and Anjuna beaches and in the heart of the popular shopping, dining and entertainment districts. The Saturday Nite Bazaar and Splash Water Park are both within walking distance of the hotel, and the Anjuna Flea Market is also close by, making the hotel a comfortable and convenient base from which to explore the coastline of North Goa.

Book from now through September and clients can enjoy 20 percent off room rates and dining at the property. [www.hhonors.com/moments](http://www.hhonors.com/moments)

#### Grand Opening Offer in Chennai

The ITC Grand Chola in Chennai is offering a special introductory package beginning on Oct. 1 with rates starting at \$160. The package also includes a resort credit of \$30 issued upon check in.

The property is Chennai's newest luxury hotel and is scheduled to open on Oct. 1. Located in Chennai's business hub of Guindy, the property is close to several key areas in the city and is near the airport. The hotel will feature 522 guestrooms in several different room categories as well as 78 luxury apartments and offers several dining outlets, a swimming pool, a fitness center, a Kaya Kalp spa and more.

[www.itshotels.in](http://www.itshotels.in)

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### Ken's Daily Muse



**Hawaii Golf:** One of Kauai's best golf courses, Princeville Resort's acclaimed Makai Golf Club, recently launched a new stay-and-play initiative.

### **Sheraton Sneak Away**

The Sheraton New Delhi Hotel is offering the Sheraton Sneak Away package with rates starting at \$160. Clients who book the best-available rate for two consecutive nights can enjoy complimentary breakfast for two and a 3 p.m. late checkout.

The property is located in New Delhi's business district and is adjacent to the city center of South Delhi. It is also close to the Max International Healthcare Hospital and the Apollo Hospital and is a 20-minute drive from the airport. [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)

### **Local Favorites**

#### **Kumbh Mela Fair**

This January, Geringer Global Travel honors the Kumbh Mela Fair with a 14-day tour celebrating one of the holiest Hindu festivals and pilgrimages. Founded on Vedic legend, the Kumbh Mela Fair is one of the largest pilgrimages, occurring in its complete form only once every 12 years and attracting around 70 million devotees at its last gathering. This year, worshippers will gather at Allahabad, a town at the convergence of the Yamuna, Saraswati and sacred Ganges rivers.

Geringer Global Travel invites travelers to experience this once-in-a-lifetime journey of prayer and pilgrimage that welcomes people from all walks of life to the hub of Hindu spirituality. Passing through Delhi, Haridwar, Agra and Kharajuraho on the way to Allahabad, the Kumbh Mela Fair Tour is Jan. 14-27, 2013, correlating with the dates of the religious festival. Rates begin at \$3,060 per person, based on double occupancy. [www.geringerglobaltravel.com](http://www.geringerglobaltravel.com)

#### **Mountain Trains & Luxury Trains**

One of the greatest ways to explore India is by train, and Incredible India recommends several routes for clients. For those who have time to spare, they can take a slow, toy train up to the hill resort of Shimla, Ooty (Udhagamandalam), Darjeeling or Matheran, where they will chug up the hills, past small hamlets and through terraced fields, making their way through tunnels and over bridges. The leisurely pace offers visitors panoramic view, and the delights of scenic areas is a great escape from busy city life.

[www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)

### **Destination Resources**

#### **Auroville**

[www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org)

#### **Incredible India**

[www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)

#### **Sri Aurobindo Ashram**

[www.sriurobindoashram.org](http://www.sriurobindoashram.org)

### **Calendar**

#### **Diwali**

Diwali, or Deepavali, one of the best-known Hindu festivals, is celebrated 18 days after Dusshera on Nov. 13. The event is called the festival of lights, and every house is illuminated with lamps and lights. The worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is an important feature of the celebrations. Homes are spring-cleaned and decorated and the celebration is accompanied by the exchange of sweets and the explosion of fireworks. Multicolored rangoli designs and floral decorations adorn the entrance of most homes. (Nov. 13-17)

#### **Lucknow Festival, Uttar Pradesh**

This festival is celebrated between Nov. 25 and Dec. 5 and captures the elegance and splendors of the ancient city of Awadh, now known as Lucknow. Colorful processions, traditional dramas, Kathak dances in the style of the famous Lucknow Gharana, Sarangi and sitar recitals along with ghazals, qawalis and thumri create a festive atmosphere. Exciting events such as ekka races, kite flying, cock fighting and other traditional village games recreate an atmosphere of bygone Nawabi days. Cuisine and craft festivals are also organized. (Nov. 25-Dec. 5)

#### **Chennai Dance & Music Festival, Tamil Nadu**

The Chennai Music and Dance Festival is a celebration of the classical music and dance of South India and is held from mid-December to mid-January at a number of venues around the city.

The city comes alive during the festival, which has now developed into a cultural extravaganza with more than 2,000 participants. Performances include vocal and instrumental music and dance by junior and senior artists, including up and coming artists who have the chance to perform alongside well-established performers.



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