



Tamil Nadu

If thoughts of temples and tigers appeal, then Tamil Nadu – land of the Tamils and heartland of southern India – is the place to be. Long coastlines and forested mountains form stunning backdrops to this, the cradle of Dravidian civilisation. Manifestations of its ancient culture are everywhere, from vast temple compounds with steeply stepped, riotously coloured *gopurams* (gateway towers) to beautifully detailed rock carvings, and classical music and dance that are both complex and compelling. Pilgrims pour into the ancient sites of Kanchipuram, Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Trichy (Tiruchirappalli), Thanjavur (Tanjore), Madurai, Kanyakumari and Rameswaram – far outnumbering tourists.

While only the very lucky few will see a tiger, the state's national parks and reserves remain important refuges for much of India's wildlife including elephants, several species of rare monkeys and gaurs (a type of bison). The historic hill stations of Ooty (Udhagamandalam), reached by the famous miniature train, and Kodaikanal are perfect bases for exploring and provide cool, calm, green contrast to the bustle of the cities.

The eastern coast fronting the Bay of Bengal has a few resorts and sleepy fishing villages, but Tamil Nadu isn't a beach destination and only Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), south of Chennai (Madras), attracts chilled-out tourists. The 2004 tsunami swept along this coast; rehabilitation was comparatively swift near tourist areas, but many local communities are still recovering.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge on fresh seafood and explore some of South India's finest rock carvings in laid-back **Mamallapuram** (Mahabalipuram; p1044)
- Ride the toy train, stay in a Raj-era hotel and trek the hills around **Ooty** (Udhagamandalam; p1098)
- Experience a small corner of France in India and an early morning yoga session in **Puducherry** (Pondicherry p1057)
- Join the pilgrims and devotees filing into Madurai's **Sri Meenakshi Temple** (p1082), a riot of Dravidian sculpture and one of South India's finest
- Dust off the binoculars and field guides around **Mudumalai National Park** (p1104), where Tamil Nadu's best wildlife viewing is on your doorstep
- See local artisans practising their crafts in traditional workshops at **DakshinaChitra** (p1044), a remarkable cultural centre on the coast road south of Chennai (Madras)
- Watch the sun rise and set over two oceans at **Kanyakumari** (p1085), on the southernmost tip of the continent



FAST FACTS

- Population: 62.1 million
- Area: 130,058 sq km
- Capital: Chennai (Madras)
- Main language: Tamil
- When to go: November to March

History

It's thought the first Dravidians were part of early Indus civilisations and that they came south to the area about 1500 BC. By 300 BC the region was controlled by three major dynasties – Cholas in the east, Pandyas in the central area and Cheras in the west. This was the classical period of Tamil literature – the Sangam Age – that continued until around AD 300.

The domains of these three dynasties changed many times over the centuries. The Pallava dynasty became influential, particularly in the 7th and 8th centuries, when it constructed many of the monuments at Mamallapuram (p1044). Although all of these dynasties were engaged in continual skirmishes, their steady patronage of the arts served to consolidate and expand Dravidian civilisation.

In 1640 the British negotiated the use of Madraspatnam (now Chennai) as a trading post. Subsequent interest by the French, Dutch and Danes led to continual conflict and, finally, almost total domination by the British, when the region became known as the Madras Presidency. Small pocketed areas, including Puducherry (Pondicherry) and Karaikal, remained under French control.

Many Tamils played a significant part in India's struggle for Independence, which was finally won in 1947. In 1956 the Madras Presidency was disbanded and Tamil Nadu was established as an autonomous state.

Information

The state tourism body is **Tamil Nadu Tourism** (www.tamilnadutourism.org) with tourist offices of varying usefulness in most cities and large towns around the state. It also runs a fairly average chain of hotels.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation over Rs 200 in Tamil Nadu (but not Puducherry) is subject to a government 'luxury' tax – 5% on rooms between Rs 200

and 500, 10% on rooms between Rs 501 and 1000 and 12.5% on rooms over Rs 1000. There's often an additional 'service tax' at upmarket hotels. Prices throughout this chapter do not include tax, unless stated otherwise. There are few surprises with hotels in Tamil Nadu – the exceptions are Puducherry, which has some lovely heritage hotels, and Ooty and Kodaikanal which have everything from forest lodges to Raj-era mansions.

PERMITS

As well as for the areas listed below, permits are required for trekking in some areas of the Nilgiri Hills around Mudumalai National Park (see p1104). Reputable guides should have the required permits for tourist trekking; researchers and academics need to apply separately.

Conservator of Forests (☎ 24321139; 8th fl, Panangal Bldg, Saidapet, Chennai) The Conservator of Forests issues permits for all areas other than the Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary, but will only do so for researchers.

Wildlife Warden's Office (WWO; Map pp1030-1; ☎ 24321471; 4th fl, DMS office, 259 Anna Salai, Teynampet, Chennai) Issues permits in advance for accommodation at Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary.

Dangers & Annoyances

Ambling through temples is clearly a highlight of Tamil Nadu. Dealing with temple touts is not. Genuine guides exist and can greatly enhance your experience – a fair rate for a knowledgeable guide is about Rs 60 per hour – but you'll need to search them out. Many self-appointed guides demand big bucks in exchange for very little, often work as a front for nearby craft or tailor shops and, although they're widespread, Kanchipuram, Trichy and Madurai seem to be their breeding grounds. As always, get recommendations from other travellers, question the knowledge of anyone offering guide services and agree on a price before you set out.

CHENNAI (MADRAS)

☎ 044 / pop 6.4 million

Chennai has neither the cosmopolitan, prosperous air of Mumbai (Bombay), the optimistic buzz of Bengaluru (Bangalore) or the historical drama of Delhi. It's muggy, polluted, hot as hell and difficult to get around. Traditional tourist attractions are few. Even the movie stars are, as one Chennaiker put it, 'not that hot'.