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cheese, breathe easy



Nidhi Sunil
in Puducherry

PLUS ANDAMANS ★ SPAIN ★ KOHIMA ★ NORWAY





★ AT HOME IN ★ PUUCHERRY

From organic chocolate to al fresco theatre, cycling tours to parasailing lessons, this pretty town's got a few secrets. Olympia Shilpa Gerald spills the beans. Photographs by Adriaan Louw

Sometimes on late afternoons, when the sunshine is mellow and warm, I amble through the narrow, snoozing lanes where trees meet overhead; where commercial establishments hum beside crumbling Tamil houses, held fast by sturdy old pillars and verandas built for weary passers-by in a more trusting age. And then it happens. That familiar twinge of the surreal as I acknowledge that it is possible to leave behind one world and step into a starkly different one by the mere act of crossing a canal. Broad, sun-dappled boulevards greet me on the other side, lined with mustard, apricot and tangerine walls with bursts of bougainvillea cascading over them; there is often a bicyclist pedalling by. Catching glimpses of blue water hugged by an even bluer sky between the streets, I quicken my pace to meet the sprawling Promenade. Beyond stretches the Bay of Bengal, cordoned off by craggy rocks, which the sea sometimes whispers to and sometimes whips, its waves crashing all over them.

The dualism does not end with the colonial division of the Old Town into White and Black, French and Tamil—it remains the essence of Puducherry (still commonly referred to by its former name, Pondicherry, and its abbreviation, Pondy), where the contemporary and colonial, hedonistic and spiritual, tranquil and chaotic, past and present wonderfully coexist. Not many cities in India can claim to be so compact and yet so cosmopolitan—the expats, people drawn by the ideology of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, French citizens, old Pondicherrians, new settlers—all contribute to this diversity.

Visitors and friends always want to know what they can



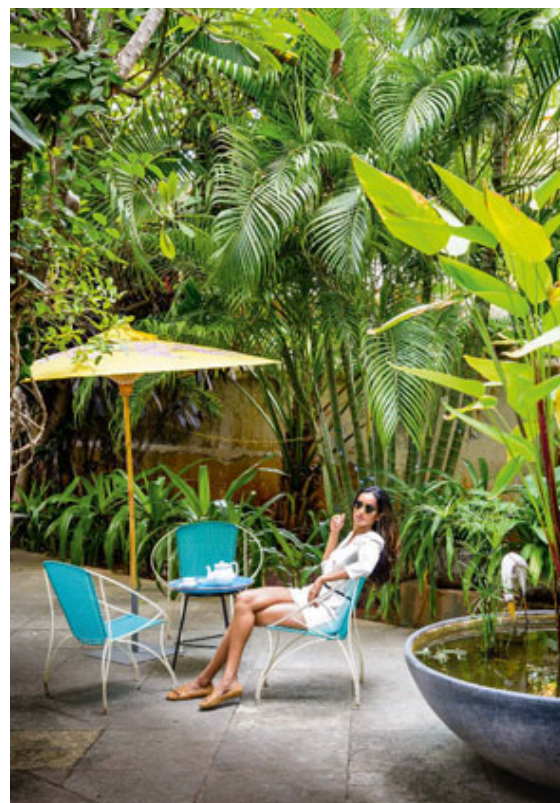
Clockwise from left: **local fare at Maison Perumal;** **model Nidhi Sunil at La Maison Rose.** On Nidhi: viscode playsuit, **Karn Malhotra;** sunglasses, **Ray-Ban;** earrings, **Vasundhara;** finger ring, **Valliyan by Nitya Arora;** moccasins, **Dune**

do in Pondy. The answer: everything and nothing. This is not one of those places you can walk around with a to-do list in hand, for there are few 'sights' to see, but much to experience. It is in its streets that the city truly reveals its soul. When I moved here three years ago, I found it hard to accept that Pondy slows you down—I resisted, and ended up with unsolicited advice from autorickshaw-drivers to chill. Eventually, I did, and learnt how to become intimate with the many shades of blue that is the Bay of Bengal, savour elusive moonrises while perched high on the rocks, relish the way it rains in one torrid, rapturous outburst. I also found that your feet are all you need to explore the town.

Designed by the Dutch, coveted by the English, built by the French, engaged in trading with Rome: in this city, glimpses of Mediterranean Europe linger. The French connection is the strongest, which collides with Indian sensibilities to create a concoction that's uniquely Pondicherry. Don't be surprised by shoppers with strings of jasmine in their hair conversing in fluent French or if an autorickshaw-driver greets you with a resounding 'Bonjour'. The **Eglise de Notre Dame des Anges** (Our Lady of Angels Church) celebrates mass in French every Sunday, and right opposite, you will find men, old and young, bent over in that uniquely French game of pétanque, which even has an annual tournament here.

The doors and windows of the French Quarter are a fascinating study in photography, while the cool glades of **Bharati Park**, with the city's iconic monument, the Aayi Mandapam (the story goes that Napoleon III raised it in honour of a courtesan, Aayi) are perfect to just sit and gaze. The **Botanical Garden** attracts many a *Life of Pi* fan eager to spot Richard Parker's zoo, only to find it the fruit of fiction. Spend rainy afternoons amid colonial-era relics at the **Pondicherry Museum** on Rue St Louis; view jewellery and pottery excavated from Arikamedu, about 5km from here, home to the ruins of a Roman trading settlement. And if you share the French penchant for cheese, make your own at **MANGO HILL** (www.hotel-mangohill-pondicherry.com), a hotel that also produces 11 types of cheese.

Tranquility is easily found in the French Quarter, but nowhere is it as potent as in the meditative silence around the samadhi of Sri →



MODEL: NIDHI SUNIL/INEGA MODEL MANAGEMENT STYLING: MEHER AHMED
HAIR & MAKE-UP: CLAIRE SCHULTZ/INEGA MODEL MANAGEMENT



Matri Mandir, Auroville.
Previous pages from left: a
beach near the Chunnambar
backwaters; vintage bicycles used
for the Wake Up Pondy Cycle Tour





Top row: cyclists on the Wake Up Pondy Cycle Tour; inside SITA Cultural Centre; handmade paper by Auroville Papers; a salad at Naturellement Garden Café. Middle row: a sitting area at LA VILLA; a guest house in Auroville; scoops of gelato at The Gelato Factory; a room at Hotel de l'Orient. Bottom row: a bicycle with a hand-painted bell, used in the Wake Up Pondy Cycle Tour; wheels of cheese on display at MANGO HILL; a wall at a popular café; the courtyard at Maison Perumal



Aurobindo and the Mother (often described as his spiritual collaborator) at their Ashram. The grey that cloaks the buildings of the Ashram contrasts with the vibrant villas of the French Quarter. The most enchanting find is the **Cluny Embroidery Centre** (Romain Rolland Street; 0413 233 5669), a gorgeous 18th-century mansion where women bend their heads over pieces of lace, their needles working nimbly, while old tunes drift out of a transistor radio. Choose from among intricately embroidered bed linen, tablecloths and handkerchiefs. For an intimate experience of the French side of the town, stay in one of the heritage hotels that come fitted with canopy beds, like **Hotel de l'Orient** (<http://hotel-de-lorient.neemranahotels.com>; doubles from ₹3,800). The most luxurious option in these parts is **LA VILLA** (www.lavillapondicherry.com; doubles from ₹14,000), which balance vintage and contemporary. It has a sister hotel called **Villa Shanti** (<http://lavillashanti.com>; doubles from ₹7,000). There are also storybook-like guest houses on Rue Dumas, Rue Romain Rolland and Rue Suffren. **Gratitude** (www.gratitudeheritage.in; doubles from ₹4,600), for example, fashions itself as a writer's retreat, complete with antique writing desks overlooking a serene courtyard.

The other side of the canal is a study in contrast, with its narrow streets named after temples, heady with camphor and resounding with the peals of temple bells. Stretches of Vysial Street, Eswaran Koil Street and Perumal Koil Street retain the quaint charm that once inspired celebrated Tamil poets such as Subramania Bharathi and Bharathidasan. And on Aurobindo Street, the beautifully restored **INTACH** building (www.intachpondicherry.org) and its permanent exhibition are a standing testament to the city's efforts to conserve its heritage and architecture. At the heart of the Tamil Quarter are the bustling Nehru and →



Rehearsal at the Adishakti theatre. Opposite page: a popular coffee and vada spot





Mission Streets, flanked in equal measure by branded showrooms and streetside bargain buys. Stay at restored palatial Tamil houses such as **La Maison Tamoule** (la-maison-tamoule.neemranahotels.com; doubles from ₹3,260) and **Maison Perumal** (www.cghearthmaisonperumal.com; doubles from ₹9,060), where the lemongrass-scented rooms come with vintage teak furniture. The serene Christian Quarter around Immaculate Conception Cathedral on Mission Street leads on to a lesser-known, distinctive area cocooned between Bussy Street and Raja Singh Street—the Muslim Quarter. Purdah-clad women walk by ancient mosques on Rue Mulla and Rue Cazy, as kids play before colourful houses. Weave through the streets of the Old Town on hand-painted vintage bicycles in the **Wake Up Pondy Cycle Tour**, which kicks off from the SITA Cultural Centre (www.pondicherry-arts.com) on Kandappa Mudaliar Street. The centre also offers activities like kalaripayattu, ballet and French cooking. Learn capoeira or samba at Kelsang Dolma's **La Casita** (<http://lacasitaindia.com>), on Eswaran Koil Street, the city's exclusive address for Latin cultural arts (though its rooftop Traveller's Café is known for its juicy Tibetan momos).

In Pondy, where you eat matters as much as what you eat—in a colonial courtyard, next to a 18th-century lighthouse or under an old mango tree strung with tea lights? **Baker Street** (www.baker-street.co.in), on Rue Bussy, with its pain au chocolat, baguettes and quiches is the closest you can come to breakfast at a French boulangerie, while the cosy **Opus 8 Café** (54 Capitaine Marius Xavier Street) is a great place for a hot cuppa. For a lavish buffet overlooking the backwaters, drive to **Le Pondy** (www.lepondy.com). Or dig into crepes and galettes at **La Creperie** (www.lamarinapondy.com). For hearty steaks, good wine and classic French staples, head to **Le Club** (www.leclubraj.com); **La Maison Rose** (8, Rue Romain Rolland) is perfect for a romantic dinner under fairy lights. If you're in a lobsters-and-jazz mood, head to **Le Dupleix hotel** (www.ledupleix.in) or local favourite Villa

From left: a room at **LA VILLA**; an installation of handmade paper at Auroville Papers. Opposite page: women working at the Cluny Embroidery Centre

Shanti. Creole is best sampled at Hotel de L'Orient. But my go-to comfort food is at La Maison Tamoule: fragrant butter rice and pachai eral curry—plump prawns steeped in coriander and mint.

Nearby, in Kuruchikuppam, is **Aurodhan** (www.aurodhan.com), where you can discover local art and watch free performances by artists from across the globe while staying in rooms decorated with art and sculpture. Down the road, **TASMAI** (www.tasmaipondy.com) conducts regular weekend workshops for those who want to weave some art into their holiday.

And outside Pondy, the late thespian Veenapani Chawla's

Adishakti Laboratory for

Theatre Arts & Research (<http://adishaktitheatrearts.com>) has a sunlit stage amid acres of green.

Cycle a bit further to **Auroville** (www.auroville.org), a settlement of those who aim to fulfil the vision of its founder, The Mother, as a place “where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities”. Whether you love it or loathe it, the fact that Auroville dares to experiment with every sphere of human activity is worth learning from. First-time visitors can expect an orientation to the township and the variety of work undertaken here. Sample organic food at nearby cafés and shop for uniquely Aurovillian products such as handcrafted musical instruments, organic cotton garments and gourmet food. For the casual visitor, however, access to Auroville is limited and its numerous workshops and activities, like sustainable farming or building bamboo houses, or facilities like dining at the Solar Kitchen are better enjoyed as a guest. Stay at one of the many **guest houses** (www.aurovilleguesthouses.org) or, better yet, sign up as a volunteer if you want to have →





a more intimate experience of the township. Learn how to make paper by hand with **Auroville Papers** (www.aurovillepress.com), right from making your own pulp. There's a whole gamut of alternative therapies offered at Auroville, but **Quiet Healing Center** (<http://quiethealingcenter.info>), on the beach is perhaps the ideal location for a rejuvenating massage.

Auroville is also a haven for those who embrace organic, locally sourced food. If you're a connoisseur of dark chocolate, don't leave without a bar from **Mason & Co** (www.masonchocolate.com), which comes in singular flavours like espresso and coconut and use organically grown cocoa and cocoa butter sourced from Indian farms, which replaces emulsifiers. The low-fat, creamy gelatos and sorbetos prepared with seasonal fresh fruit at **Gelato Factory** (www.gelatofactory.in) are the perfect dessert after a meal at **La Pasta** (55, Vysial Street)—both places are run by Italians. Other popular stops are **Marc's Café** (094433 26499), which blends beans sourced from Indian coffee estates, and **Auroville Bakery** (0413 262 2159), where bread is baked in firewood kilns. The largely Mediterranean menu at **Naturellement Garden Café** (www.naturellement.in) is prepared using ingredients sourced from local organic farms; you can also buy syrups, nut butters, jams, jellies and more. And don't miss the wood-fired pizzas at **Tanto** (0413 2622 368), which are best washed down with a bottle of iced tea. **Umami Kitchen** (7, Labourdonnais Street) offers European and Asian fare, and there's some good falafel and hummus at **Well Café** (0413 2622 219). **Goyo** (094896 93809), a silent restaurant (yes, really) serves authentic Korean food, and makes for a unique culinary adventure.

For more active adventures, Serenity or Bodhi Beach is the place to be. Sign up for a surfing session with the **Kallialay Surf School** (www.surfschoolindia.com). If you are confident of swimming in the sea,



From left: **at the chocolate factory of Mason & Co; surfboards at Kallialay Surf School.** Opposite page: **curios and artefacts at the boutique at La Maison Rose**



Spanish brothers Juan and Samai Reboul will make sure you stand up on your board by the end of lesson one. Pondicherry is no Andamans, but the dive masters at **Temple Adventures** (www.templeadventures.com) will take you under and show what the seas have to offer. And parasailing is Pondy's newest extreme sport, courtesy **Roads and Journeys** (www.roadsandjourneys.com), which conducts overland experiences that provide the best bird's-eye views of the region. On land, though, the New Lighthouse in Dubrayapet provides the best vistas of the city and its coastline. Paradise Beach is Pondy's most pristine beach, accessed by a boat that powers through the backwaters of the Chunnambar River. You can peacefully build sand castles, play ball or read a book. Its strong currents, however, make it less than ideal for swimming, and the shack has very basic food.

Despite the sprawling beaches, it is the Promenade that I return to, for its many moods, its snatches of live music, for conversations with strangers and friends. But most of all, to watch a colourful pageant unfold as locals and travellers meditate, gossip or just stroll along, gelatos in hand. From 5.30pm to dawn, it turns into a pedestrian-only zone, when kids skate and race joyfully. To wake up to this seascape every morning, check into Hidesign's **The Promenade** (www.thepromenadepondicherry.com; doubles from ₹6,000) or the Ashram's seaside guest house, **The Retreat** (www.aurosociety.org), provided you're okay with a curfew and without TV, wi-fi and alcohol.

You need a Mumbai or Chennai to build an empire, but you need a Pondicherry to give you perspective. Pondicherry, I think, makes us pause to wonder, to find the parts of ourselves we lose while rushing between traffic lights, trapped in glass and steel edifices, chasing the undefined. It helps us hear our thoughts above the din and sometimes, the sound of a voice within. In the words of that much-loved fictional bear, Winnie the Pooh, "Rivers know this: there is no hurry; we shall get there some day." Pondicherry knows that secret, too. 🐻

GETTING THERE

Fly to Chennai with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) or IndiGo (www.book.goindigo.in) from most Indian cities. Puducherry is a three-hour drive away.