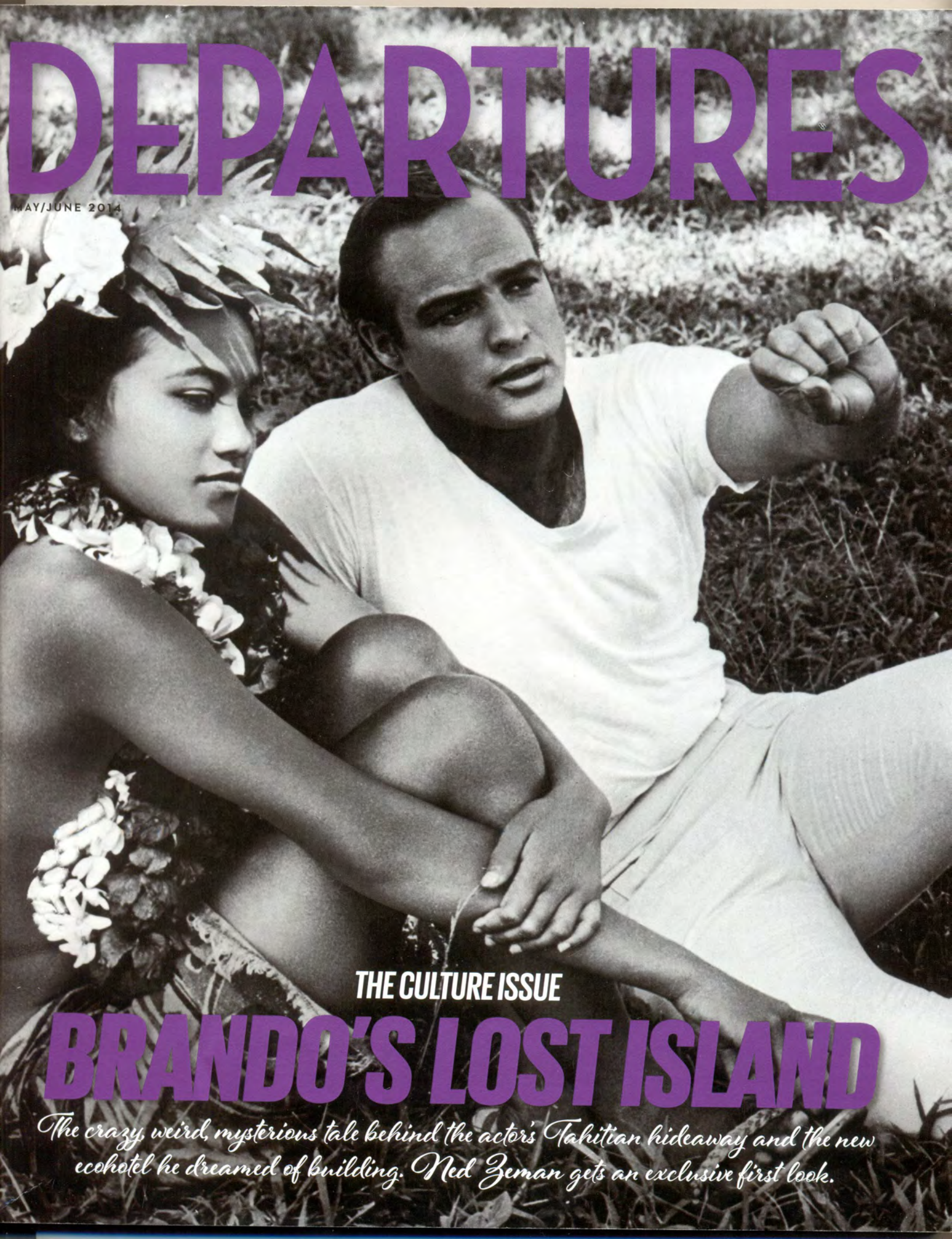
DEPARTURES

MAY/JUNE 2014



THE CULTURE ISSUE

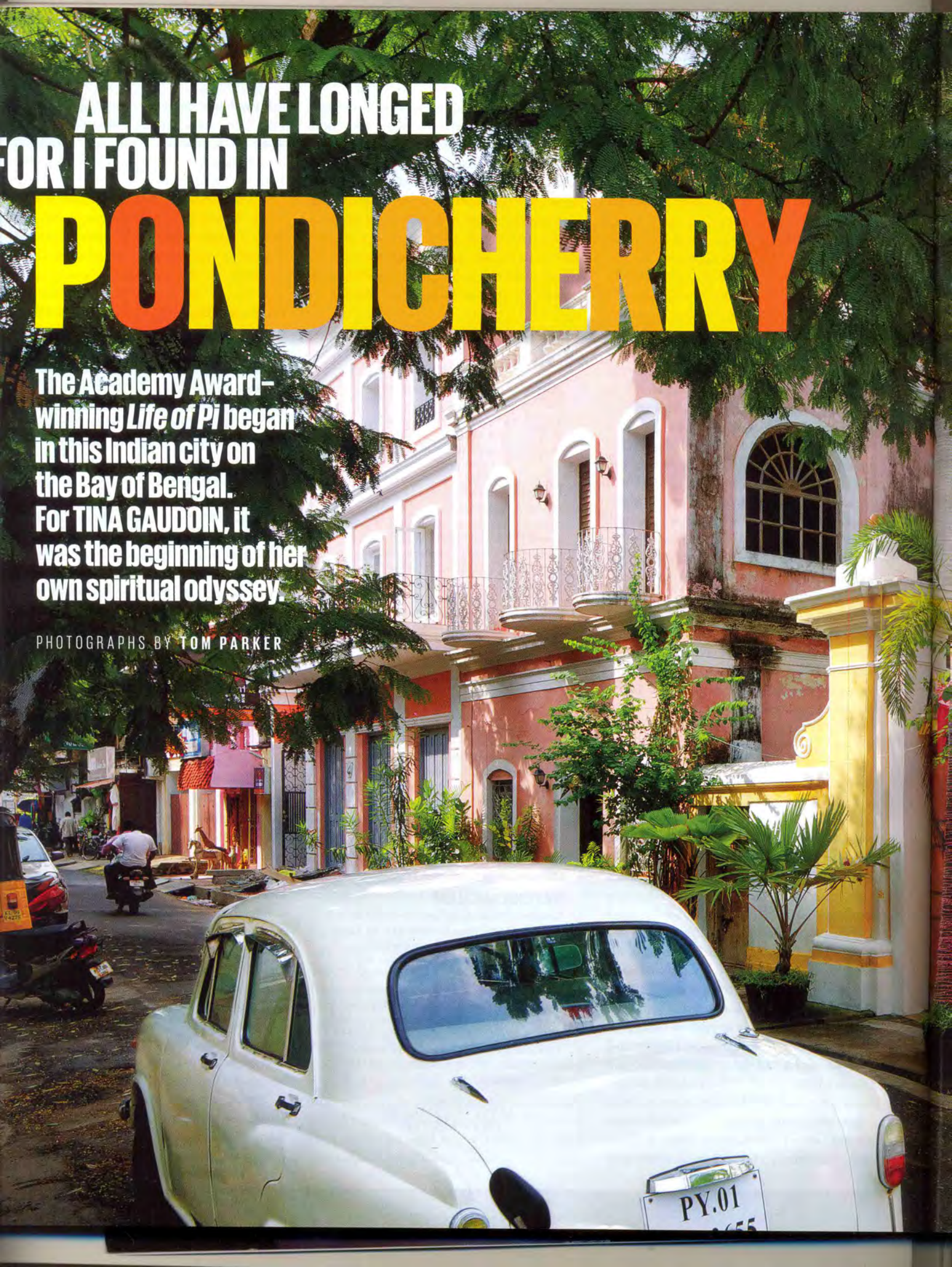
BRANDO'S LOST ISLAND

The crazy, weird, mysterious tale behind the actor's Tahitian hideaway and the new ecohotel he dreamed of building. Ned Zeman gets an exclusive first look.

ALL I HAVE LONGED FOR I FOUND IN PONDICHERRY

The Academy Award–winning *Life of Pi* began in this Indian city on the Bay of Bengal. For TINA GAUDOIN, it was the beginning of her own spiritual odyssey.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM PARKER



TO BORROW FROM THE STEELY DAN SONG,

PONDICHERRY TUMBLES INTO THE SEA,

WHICH IS PRECISELY WHAT MAKES THE CITY SO ALLURING.

Tucked away on the Bay of Bengal in the southeastern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, "Pondi," as the locals call it, was first recorded as a Roman trading port in the mid-first century and was, since the 17th century, controlled by the French, the Dutch, the English and then the French (in that order) before being returned to India in 1956.

The French are a big part of why I am here (and also the reason that Pondi retains a seductive mix of old French colonial and "native" India). I'm on a personal pilgrimage—attempting to answer two of the bigger (and some might say more indulgent) questions life can throw at us: Where did I come from? Where am I going? (I also couldn't resist seeing what the locals have made of the latest Western invasion of their little patch of paradise, thanks to those beautiful, albeit CGI-enhanced, opening scenes in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi,* which has done for Pondi what *La Dolce Vita* did for Rome and *Madagascar* did for, well, Madagascar.)

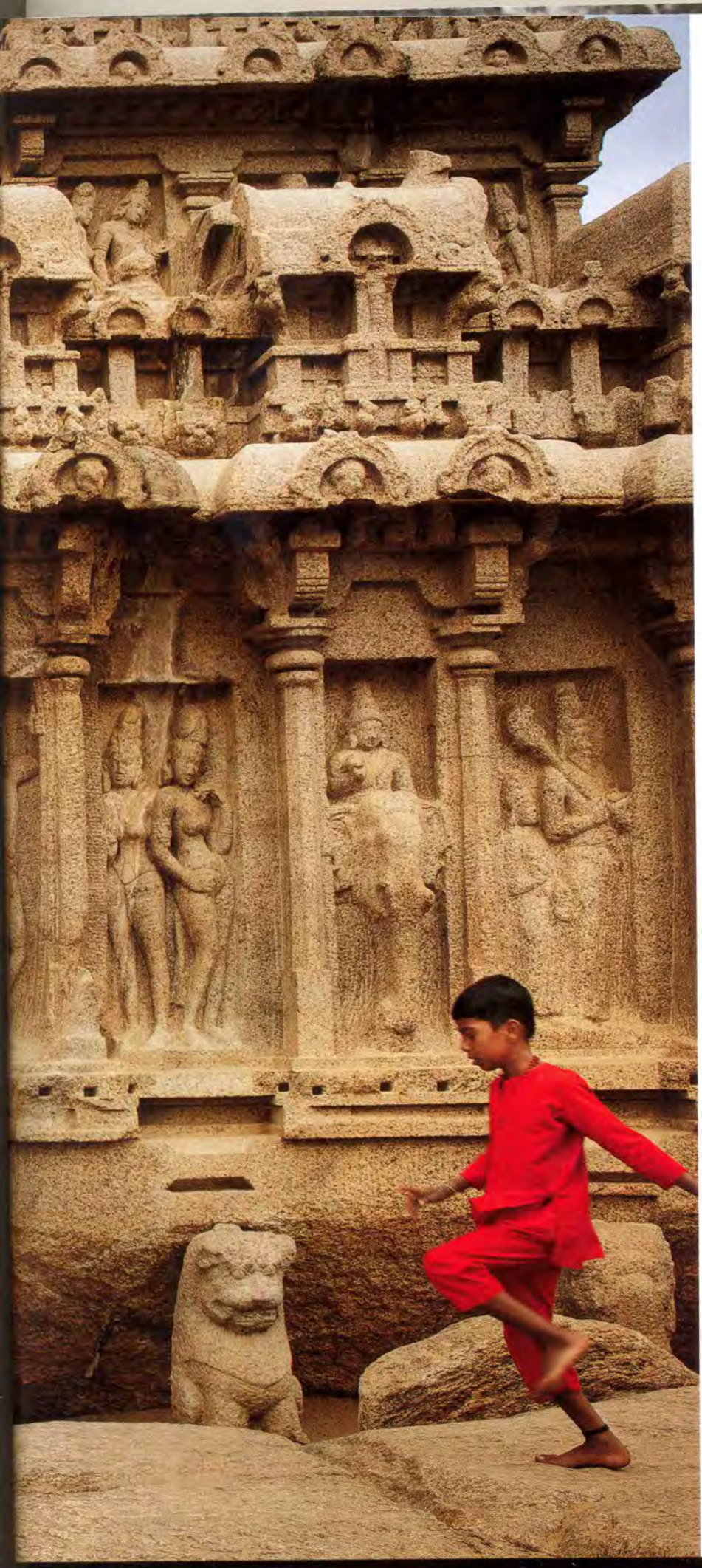
The paper trail of my ancestry begins two hours north of Pondicherry in Chennai (formerly Madras), where, according to Commonwealth records (I reside in London), my relative Anthony Gaudoin (an auctioneer) arrived from France with his sons, Joseph and Charles, in 1797 on the *Royal Charlotte.* I can't help but think that being French, they must've at least visited Pondi, if not lived here.

But no amount of research or walking in my ancestor's footsteps can help me with the second question. I confess I have spent a good part of the last 20 years stumbling along the path less traveled, which has included a weeklong ritual mortification otherwise known as the Hoffman Process; a rather chilly two-day rebirthing procedure on the edge of a moor in Cornwall, England; a three-week program of sitting silently while listening to Mozart and completing a tapestry (yes, really); running a marathon; cofounding a yoga center; canoeing the Zambezi; trekking through Bhutan; and meditating in Thailand. At the end of all this, I find myself fiftyish, divorced-ish and with a dawning awareness that if this is the path less traveled, then there's something wrong with my sense of direction.

In India, where one is never more than a few paces from the divine, there is no excuse for *not* looking inward. This is particularly true of Pondicherry, home to one of the world's biggest and most established ashrams, Sri Aurobindo, and the alternative community of Auroville (about six miles to the north), both of which hold a fascination for me, particularly as they are nonreligious—meaning anyone of any faith can practice there. Like almost every alternative community, both have had their share of good and bad press, and just before I arrive, I discover that the ashram and Auroville were recently the subject of a government investigation. On the grounds that a) there is at yet no ruling or judgment on matters, and b) I may never pass this way again, I resolve still to visit and with an open mind.

After the French returned in 1699, they designed Pondi on a grid, splitting it into two towns: white (the French Quarter) and black (the Indian Quarter). The wide boulevards remain, and the large, stately structures with intricate masonry and columns stand proudly but unsteadily, their sugary colored paint artfully peeling with age. Every so often new India makes itself known with garish signage: "Fridge Store," "Internet Café," "Burger Bar." On almost every block, bamboo scaffolding of the uniquely precarious Indian variety is rampant and stands in stark contrast to villas recently bought for record prices and restored by French-Indian residents. (About 6,000 people hold French and Indian passports, a relic of the old regime in Tamil.) CONTINUED»

The pool at Pondicherry's Palais de Mahé, a hotel named after a formerly French area on India's west coast; the dining room of Jamavar, a restaurant at the Leela Palace in Chennai, which serves North and South Indian cuisine; locals selling cotton candy in Pondicherry.



Speculators talk of Pondi, with its new airport, as being the star attraction for India's burgeoning middle classes—a kind of Goa. Except, of course, Pondi could never be the new Goa; it's not built that way. The rigors and strictures of a "proper" French upbringing (the language is still spoken here) have rendered the town—for all its chaos, dilapidation and a somewhat shocking garbage problem—far too genteel to ever give in to the excesses of rave culture. There is also no beach, merely a sea defense that would have offered little respite had the 2004 tsunami roared ashore here as it did 20 miles farther up the coast, engulfing entire fishing villages in its foamy black wake.

Pondi has always attracted renegades, alternative types and controversy. The most famous is the Indian nationalist agitator Sri Aurobindo (born Aurobindo Ghosh), who took refuge in the city after being acquitted of involvement in the 1908 Alipore Bomb case, in which two British citizens were killed. While in captivity Ghosh claimed to have been visited by the late Swami Vivekananda, one of the first spiritual figures to introduce yogic and Vedic texts to the West. As a result, Ghosh relinquished his political work to focus on setting up the Sri Aurobindo Ashram *(91-413/223-3604; sriaurobindoashram.org)* with Frenchwoman Mirra Alfassa (later known as "the Mother").

In many senses Sri Aurobindo *is* the backbone of the city. It owns a good portion of the buildings in the French Quarter (all painted a distinctive shade of gray), and it attracts thousands to the area every year. Visitors and seekers alike pay homage to the founders by filing quietly through a courtyard strewn with flowers, which houses the white marble tombs of Ghosh and Alfassa. Those wanting to stay and give service at the ashram can book into one of the modest but eminently affordable guesthouses located a walk or a bicycle ride away.

Its headquarters is a vast old colonial building tucked neatly beside the Manakula Vinayagar temple (infamous for its resident elephant called Lakshmi). Inside, dark and brooding portraits of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother stare down blankly. At one end of the cavernous room, an elderly, white-haired lady in thick spectacles writes intently, her pen scratching the paper as she works. Here I meet Vijay Poddar, the public face of the ashram, who does a great job of explaining its genesis and an even better one of skirting neatly around "the controversies." CONTINUED»

We talk about my background and Poddar lasers in on my situation, pushing his index fingers together and pressing them above his lips. "You like to start things and then move on," he pronounces, "but you are still searching." Arguably these are the vagaries one could level at any ashram visitor, but they strike a chord. Soon I'm enthusiastically lunching in the spotless dining room, as hundreds file through to do the same. Maybe it's the detachment from the real world, or the fact that everyone here is engaged in working toward a "greater good"—ashram dwellers are expected to work unselfishly, as per the Mother's instructions, in one of the ashram's more than 80 departments as a form of spiritual discipline—but the mood is infectious. I tell Poddar about my desire to visit Auroville and the Matrimandir (the golden temple at its center), and he laughs wryly. "You need to book a place," he says. "It is incredibly popular." When he sees how disappointed I am, he agrees to help.

AS A TRAVEL DESTINATION, PONDI IS "INDIA LITE," THE PERFECT POINT OF ENTRY FOR SUBCONTINENT VIRGINS.

Auroville *(auroville.org)* is a 30-minute car ride from Pondi, and you need a pass in order to stay there, whether you have a few days to spare or a month. Founded in 1968 by the Mother, the community, characterized as an experiment in human unity, is home to 2,000 people from across the globe who live what can be described only as a sustainable alternative lifestyle. Bicycles and motorbikes are the norm, and many work at the center in return for assisted board; they are visible as either tour guides, shop assistants or gardeners in the landscaped grounds surrounding the Matrimandir. Many also work on the 14 sustainable farms or in the back office, administrating what is effectively a medium-sized, fully functioning village. Auroville is managed by an Indian-government-appointed board and has been endorsed by UNESCO. At its heart is the solar-powered, futuristic golden-domed Matrimandir, a temple to no religion in particular but a place of quiet meditation. At the center of the interior chamber, a 27-inch (in diameter) crystal globe refracts the sunlight into the dome itself.

I immersed myself in the community's quiet vibe at Dune Eco Village & Spa *(rooms, from $80; Pudhukuppam; 91-93/6445-5440; duneecogroup.com),* where founders Dimitri Klein and Sunil Varghese have successfully merged the commercial spa with the hippie escapism for which India is renowned.

Klein, once a top advertising executive in Paris, says he gave it all up because he and his wife "couldn't see a future for our children in Europe." He is also an ex-Aurovillian. "I felt we could do more on the outside than on the inside, but the ethos is all here," he says. At the quirky 35-acre sustainable resort bordering the beach, Klein used reclaimed materials from Chettinad palaces, South Indian colonial houses and Kerala planters' mansions to create individually designed bungalows and rooms that blend the contemporary with the traditional; it's all here, plus a menagerie of farm animals, dogs and a very helpful staff.

My visit to Auroville, during which I'm jammed onto a bus with 20 or so other "seekers" and shepherded around by various Auro officials, leaves me reflective but frustrated. I'm puzzled by the temple's popularity until an Aurovillian explains that busloads of India's expanding middle class have been bitten by the travel bug and arrive daily to see the fabled dome, covered in 40 pounds of gold leaf. There's no doubting the awe that being inside the Matrimandir evokes, but the corporate marshaling of the tour seems countercultural and far too sanitized. One can see very little of the place itself (though a former inhabitant I meet along the way recommends taking an organized bicycle tour). "The only way to really

understand this place is to live here," she says. I suspect that she's right. The idea is not unappealing. On the plane ride home, I catch myself taking out a calendar and idly calculating how many years it will be before my teenager starts college, leaving me free to explore my "alternative lifestyle."

In India nothing is incidental, but the best things are often accidental. My friend Mehra Dalton is an Indian travel specialist *(800-318-7801; greaves-travel.com)* and when helping me plan my trip instantly understood that the purpose was not R&R. Before I arrived, she set up a dinner with Michael Weston, a longtime musician friend "who knows everything about Pondi and everyone."

The evening we meet, no sooner have I told Weston (who arrives with his gorgeous Indian classical dancer wife, Rekha) a tiny part of my family story than he pronounces that I simply must meet his artist friend Desmond Lazaro. "I think you two might have similar genes," he says vaguely.

PONDI & CHENNAI
THE DETAILS

As a travel destination, Pondi is "India Lite." It's the perfect point of entry for Subcontinent virgins into a culture that can be loud, aggressive, regressive and deeply impenetrable.

Stay at the wonderfully low-key, recently restored French colonial **Palais de Mahé** *(rooms, from $100; 4 Rue de Boissy; 91-41/3234-5611; cghearth.com)*, with its simple wooden furniture, breezy rooftop restaurant (serving Western and Asian fare) and verdant tiled courtyard—complete with a rather noisy swimming pool—and ask for rooms on the upper floors; eat Indian and French food at the über-chic **Villa Shanti** *(14 Suffren St.; 91-41/3420-0028; lavillashanti.com)*; and shop the **Cluny Embroidery Centre** at the convent on Rue Romain Rolland for exquisite hand-embroidered linens and **FabIndia** *(223 Mission St.; fabindia.com)* for hand-blocked or tie-dyed blouses, shawls and *salwar kameez*. **La Maison Rose** *(8 Rue Romain Rolland; lamaisonrosepondicherry.com)*, perhaps the most sophisticated and stylish store in southern India, has an eclectic mix of clothing, arts, household goods and jewelry, none of which will look out of place back home.

In Chennai, if you want to know what new India really looks like (and what new Indians really want), stay at the **Leela Palace** *(rooms, from $140; Adyar Seaface; 91-44/3366-1234; theleela.com)*, a hotel that puts the "b" in "bling"; it's where Vegas left off and Bollywood charged in. Ornate mirrors, marble, gilt, swags, bold colors, dark woods, Indian artifacts and more restaurants than one could possibly use (including a magnificent bakery in the lobby) make the Leela an experience in and of itself. —*T.G.*

I meet Lazaro, a native of Leeds, England, at his studio, which, to my surprise and delight, is located upstairs from La Maison Rose (see "Pondi & Chennai: The Details"). I learn that the store is owned by Agathe, Lazaro's fashion-savvy French wife. Lazaro looks like any number of my cousins rolled into one. Turns out we both have family records stored at Fort St. George in Chennai. He is fascinated not only by his family's heritage but also by the calligraphy that was employed to record it. We go back even farther and discover an Armenian link: his great-grandfather and my great-great-grandfather, a dealer in precious stones. "But you know they are not from Armenia, these relatives of ours," he says. This is new information. I had barely given the Armenian connection a moment's consideration. "They are from Persia," Lazaro says. "Go to the Armenian Church in Chennai and you will see where they all gathered and where many are now buried."

I head for Chennai in search of more family history. On the way I make a stop at the extraordinary UNESCO World Heritage site of Mahabalipuram, with its famous mélange of caves, carvings and temples dating back to the seventh and eighth centuries, including the famous Descent of the Ganges and the beautiful Shore Temple. If you see just one famous site in southern India, this categorically should be it.

I head out into the city with my redoubtable guide, Girija Duraiswamy, to Fort St. George, once a British stronghold (the first in India, founded in 1644) and the place where the entry of my ancestors from France is recorded. On May 8, 1802, my relative Charles Gaudoin married Miss Georgina Campbell here in St. Mary's Church (the oldest British building in India and the oldest Anglican church east of Suez). As we stand in the transept of the church and gaze at a vast tower of ancient, leather-bound tomes in various states of decrepitude (the Indians were not big on keeping their colonial records in good order—you can't really blame them), my guide raises an eyebrow and lets loose a volley of Tamil that is directed at the record keeper. "There's no archiving system here," she says wearily. "You literally have to sit down and look at each book for your relatives' names." After an hour or so of studying the intricate, swooping, faded script of the births, deaths and marriages of Anglicans in India of the 1800s, while the warm CONTINUED ON PAGE 228»

Krishna's Butter Ball at Mahabalipuram is a giant rock that's naturally perched on a slope.

PONDICHERRY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 227

monsoon rain beats a staccato pattern on the flagstones of the church graveyard outside, I concede defeat. In truth, the India Office Records at the British Library at home in London could probably offer me more information.

At the enormous green door of the Armenian Church down the street, I encounter more resistance in the form of a warden who is eating his lunch and refuses me entry on the grounds that the church is being renovated. I talk my way into the courtyard, where I marvel at its white columns and mounds of rubble and broken statues. A few hundred Armenians are buried here, but the place is in such a state of disarray and the rain is so torrential that I cannot get close. The Armenians in Chennai were an elite band of merchants who walked into India via the Hindu Kush. Ending up in Chennai, they dealt with the English in rare spices, silks and exquisite gemstones. The church is all that remains of the once wealthy, vibrant population. Perhaps it's the stark sense of loss or maybe it's just the jet lag, but either way, I feel tears welling. Several Indians sheltering from the downpour stare politely and inquisitively at the forlorn-looking Westerner with the black umbrella. "You can come back and look again," says the warden kindly as Duraiswamy translates, "when the church is good again."

"I am sorry that you did not find what you were looking for," says Duraiswamy at the end of our long day. Actually, I say, the opposite is true. This trip was a marker for me. I wanted to come to the very place where, in 1797, my family began a whole new adventure in an alien land. It sounds dramatic, but I wanted to stand where they stood and imagine as best as I could the way their lives might have been. And I wanted to visit Pondicherry and Auroville, to see whether I could imagine a new life for myself. As I wave goodbye to Duraiswamy through the gathering gloom, with the warm rain still falling softly, I recognize the emergence of something that has lain dormant within me for quite some time: the glimmer of a very real sense of possibility. ♦

BRANDO'S ISLAND

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 193

sensibility. To the right you'll find a bedroom with a king-size bed from which you can see clear to the Pacific; the bathroom has twin plantation-style sinks and an outdoor tub. Step outside onto the back patio and there's your own little plunge pool. Take a few more steps and suddenly you're standing on what is, for all practical purposes, your own private beach. At no point will the neighboring villas be visible to you: Per Brando's directions, the beach remains wholly free of commercial development. The lagoon feels like your lagoon.

Most importantly: The air-conditioning is perfect. This is no small accomplishment; in fact, Darcy seemed most excited when showing off the resort's renewable-energy processes: solar panels, zinc-bromine flow batteries, a biofuel thermal power station and, last but not least, Sea Water Air Conditioning. Basically, the resort ran a large pipeline out into the ocean; it sucks in cold seawater, which is then transformed into a coolant. The process is as simple as it is spectacular.

And yet. Even as I beheld the eco-splendor, part of me couldn't help but wonder if the whole green thing was just shtick—a branding strategy to rope in rich vacationistas who want to feel like they're making a difference.

I felt better once Darcy showed me a large "ecostation" that houses two new labs, one indoor, one outdoor, that serve as a kind of think tank for scientists and students devoted to preserving and studying the atoll's biodiversity. There I came across a marine biologist studying the coral reefs; in the background, a group of schoolkids were getting lessons in conservation. Already the ecostation has developed relationships with three U.S. colleges. It was the brainchild of Brando himself.

For years the resort was the subject of heated debate and haggling; at times some of Brando's own children were up in arms. The resort wasn't built until everyone got a piece of the action.

Perhaps the most persuasive Tahitian I met that week was an attorney named Hinano Bagnis. She runs the Tetiaroa Society, a nonprofit devoted to sustainable development. Bagnis does this in part because of the impact Brando made on both her and the atoll. She met Brando back in the '70s, when she was just one of the local kids he loved to play with.

"I'm not really interested in the Hollywood part," Bagnis said. "The man was a visionary. He brought the Smithsonian here around the early '80s to research and protect [Tetiaroa]." As for the resort, she said, "The commercial part doesn't bother me, because it's the vision of Brando. Preservation is hard. The government doesn't have much money. A hotel can bring some money and help the preservation. It's worth it."

Ultimately, though, the one person who could best assess The Brando's merits didn't live long enough to see it. So we'll just have to take Bailey's word for it when he said: "I've felt Marlon looking over my shoulder every step of the way. Hardly a single decision was made without weighing how it fit with his vision—not just out of respect for him, but because he really did understand what was the good thing to do on his island. We're very much trying to realize that vision. I think it's a great vision." ♦

The Brando starts at $2,500 a night for up to two people, with a minimum of three nights; to book, go to thebrando.com.

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