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PONDICHERRY

Matrimandir, Auroville

The glistening, golden-domed temple at the centre of this spiritual community

Words **TINA GAUDOIN**

IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE ASIA'S ANSWER TO EPCOT from the outside, but the Matrimandir (or Temple of the Mother) is not a tourist site. It is, as the official website reminds the busloads of middle-class Indians who visit daily, 'a place for individual silent concentration'. The temple is at the heart of Auroville, an experimental community for followers of Integral Yoga, a spiritual rather than physical practice founded by the Mother (Mirra Alfassa) and Sri Aurobindo in 1968. The building's distinctive golden geodesic dome, which is covered in 1,415 gold discs, was built by Roger Anger, a Le Corbusier disciple and Beaux-Arts graduate.

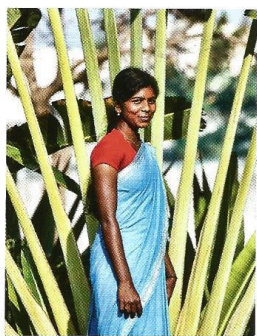
Once inside the temple (you can only visit as part of an organised tour during specific hours), the sheer brilliance of the dome's construction and the peaceful, spiritual vibe it induces is awesome. In the white-marbled, white-carpeted (shoes off!) inner chamber, which is used by Aurovillians for meditation, sits the world's largest optically perfect crystal-glass globe. This refracts a ray of guided light directly into the space, suffusing it with bright sunshine.

Auroville is run by the Indian government and is officially recognised by UNESCO. Those who are accepted into the city can

stay for as little as a few weeks, but many have stayed for years, participating in one of the few viable alternative communities in the world. Anger, a frequent collaborator with Pierre Puccinelli (notably on the Île Verte in Grenoble) lived there until his death in 2008. His Modernist home still sits in the Auroville grounds.

Visiting the Matrimandir is easy, as it's just a 30-minute taxi ride from Pondicherry, the coastal town developed by the French and made famous by the film *Life of Pi*. Sometimes called 'the New Orleans of India', Pondicherry is the perfect base from which you can visit Auroville and experience the laid-back pace of South India, a welcome relief from the freneticism of the north.

Follow the coast up towards glitzy Chennai and you will come across the extraordinary site of Mahabalipuram, with its caves, carvings and temples that date back to the seventh and eighth centuries. Sights include the Descent of the Ganges – depicting the legend of how the sacred river flowed down to earth from heaven – and the Shore Temple, which overlooks the Bay of Bengal. *Auroville, Viluppuram, Tamil Nadu (auroville.org); travel with Greaves India (greavesindia.co.uk)*



Clockwise from top left
Shore Temple; the colourful
streets of Pondicherry; a statue
of the Hindu deity Kali

WHERE TO STAY

1 PALAIS DE MAHÉ

This restored French colonial building is decorated with simple wooden furniture and has a breezy rooftop restaurant that serves a brilliant selection of Western and Asian fare. Its verdant tiled courtyard is a great place to relax, even if the swimming-pool area can become rather noisy. Ask for a room on the upper floors for a peaceful stay. *Doubles from £62; 4 Rue de Bussy, 605001 (cghearth.com)*

2 LA VILLA

Located in the old quarter known as White Town, this boutique hotel blends a colonial exterior with minimalist, Tamil-inspired architecture. In the six chic suites there's a mix of the modern and the traditional. The venue does not accommodate children under 14, which could be a blessing or a curse. *Doubles from £123; 11 rue Surcof, 605001 (lavillapondicherry.com)*



WHERE TO DINE

VILLA SHANTI

Indian and French food – a nod to the city's mixed cultural past – is on offer at the Villa Shanti. Take a table on the patio, which features a living wall, hinting at the restaurant owners' love of local, organic ingredients. *14 Suffren Street, 605001 (lavillashanti.com)*

LA MAISON ROSE

Asian fusion cuisine is served in the greenery-lined courtyard of this sophisticated and stylish store, which sells clothing and homewares. *8 Romain Rolland Street, 605001 (lamaisonrosepondicherry.com)*

HOTEL SURGURU

For a proper Indian treat, this hotel's restaurant serves some of the best spicy specialities in town. *104 Sardar Vallabhai Patel Road, 605001 (hotelsurguru.com) ➤*