Why Go?

Tamil Nadu is the homeland of one of humanity’s living classical civilisations, stretching back uninterrupted for two millennia and very much living on today in the Tamils’ language, dance, poetry and Hindu religion.

But this state with its age-old trading vocation is as dynamic as it is immersed in tradition. Fire-worshipping devotees who smear tikka on their brows in the famously spectacular Tamil temples may then head off to IT offices to develop new software applications – and afterwards unwind in a stylish nocturnal haunt in rapidly modernising Chennai (Madras).

When the heat and noise of Tamil Nadu’s temple towns overwhelm, escape to the very end of India where three seas mingle, or up to the cool, forest-clad, wildlife-prowled Western Ghats. It’s all packed into a state that remains proudly distinct from the rest of India, while at the same time being among the most welcoming.

When to Go

Jan The weather is at its (rela-
tive) coolest and Pongal (harvest) celebrations spill into the streets.

Jul–Sep Head to the hill stations after the crowded, expensive ‘sea-
son’, weather is still good.

Nov–Dec The full-moon festival of lights.
Tamil Nadu's favourite foods are overwhelmingly vegetarian, with lots of coconut and chilli. You’ll find dosas, *idlis* (spongy, round fermented rice cakes) and *vadas* (deep-fried lentil-flour doughnuts), all served with coconut chutney and *sambar* (lentil broth). Almost as ubiquitous is the *uttapam*, a thick, savoury rice pancake that typically comes with chopped onions, green chillies and coriander. South Indian ‘meals’ – thalis based around rice, lentil dishes, *rasam* (hot and sour tamarind soup) and chutneys, often served on a banana leaf – are also good. The main local exception to the all-veg diet is Chettinad food, originating from the Chettinadu region south of Trichy but available at restaurants in bigger towns. The dishes are spicy but not fiery. For a state growing a lot of tea, Tamil Nadu really loves its coffee; filtered coffee (mixed with milk and sugar, of course, and a dash of chicory) is often more readily available than tea. Restaurant prices include the taxes added to menu rates at some places.