



Tamil Nadu & Chennai

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Best Temples

- ➔ Meenakshi Amman Temple (p1058)
- ➔ Brihadishwara Temple (p1048)
- ➔ Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple (p1053)
- ➔ Arunachaleswar Temple (p1034)
- ➔ Nataraja Temple (p1045)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Visalam (p1057)
- ➔ Les Hibiscus (p1040)
- ➔ Bungalow on the Beach (p1046)
- ➔ 180° Mclver (p1075)

Why Go?

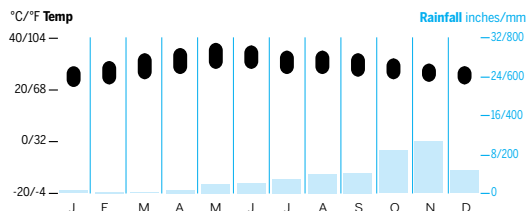
Tamil Nadu is the homeland of one of humanity's living classical civilisations, stretching back uninterrupted for two millennia and very much living on today in the Tamils' language, dance, poetry and Hindu religion.

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

Chennai



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

Jul–Sep Head to the hill stations after the crowded, expensive 'season', weather is still good.

Nov–Dec The full-moon festival of lights.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Chennai Airport will be your probable entry point if you're flying into Tamil Nadu from overseas, although Trichy, Madurai and Coimbatore also have (limited) international services. The same four cities are also the state's major train junctions.

Fast Facts

- **Population:** 72.1 million
- **Area:** 130,058 sq km
- **Capital:** Chennai (Madras)
- **Main language:** Tamil
- **Sleeping prices:**
\$ below ₹1000, \$\$ ₹1000 to ₹5000, \$\$\$ above ₹5000

Top Tip

If you need train tickets in a hurry, the Foreign Tourist Cell at Chennai Central is the most helpful and efficient we've ever come across; tickets for booked-up trains anywhere in India seem to become magically available here.

Resources

- **TamilNadu** (<http://tamilnadu.com>)
- **Tamil Nadu Forest Dept** (www.forests.tn.nic.in)
- **Tamil Nadu Tourism** (<http://tamilnadutourism.org>)
- **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com.au/india)

Food

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.

DON'T MISS

Few parts of India are as fervent in their worship of the Hindu gods as Tamil Nadu. Great temples stun with their spectacular architecture, the colour of their crowds of worshippers, and their noisy, chaotic festivals. For artistry don't miss the World Heritage-listed trio at **Thanjavur**, **Darasuram** village (near Kumbakonam) and **Gangaikondacholapuram**. For spectacle and contemporary fervour, head to **Madurai**, **Chidambaram**, **Srirangam** (Trichy) and **Tiruvannamalai**. Escape from the heat of the plains to the hill stations in the cool, misty **Western Ghats**. The Nilgiri Mountain Railway, alias the 'toy train', snaking its way up nearly 2000m of forest-clothed mountain, makes a trip to **Ooty** (Udhagamandalam) unforgettable; **Kodaikanal** is a smaller, prettier, quirkier alternative to Ooty.

Top State Festivals

- **International Yoga Festival** (☺ 4–7 Jan, Puducherry, p1036)
- **Pongal** (☺ mid-Jan, statewide) Harvest festival.
- **Thyagaraja Aradhana** (☺ Jan, Thiruvaiyaru, p1049)
- **Teppam (Float) Festival** (☺ Jan/Feb, Madurai, p1060) Meenakshi temple deities are taken on a tour of the town.
- **Natyanjali Dance Festival** (☺ Feb/Mar, Chidambaram, p1045)
- **Chithirai Festival** (☺ Apr/May, Madurai, p1060) Celebrates the marriage of Meenakshi to Sundareswarar (Shiva).
- **Karthikai Deepam Festival** (☺ Nov/Dec, statewide) Festival of lights.
- **Chennai Festival of Music & Dance** (☺ mid-Dec–mid-Jan, Chennai, p1014) Celebrates southern music and dance.
- **Mamallapuram Dance Festival** (☺ Dec–Jan, Mamallapuram, p1028) Four-weeks of dance, drama and music.