



Tamil Nadu & Chennai

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Best Places to Eat

- » Any branch of Hotel Saravana Bhavan (p322)
- » Bangala (p362)
- » Satsanga (p346)

Best Places to Stay

- » Calve (p343)
- » Visalam (p362)
- » 180 McIver (p379)
- » Carlton Hotel (p373)

Why Go?

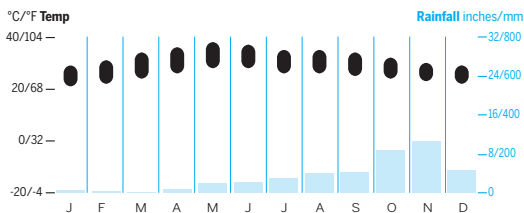
Tamil Nadu is the homeland of one of humanity's living classical civilisations, a people whose culture has grown, but in many ways not fundamentally altered, since the Greeks sacrificed goats to Zeus.

But this state is as dynamic as it is drenched in history. In Tamil Nadu's famous temples, fire-worshipping devotees smear tikka on their brows before heading to IT offices to develop new software applications. Tamil Nadu has one foot in the 21st century and the other in the poetry of one of the oldest literary languages on Earth.

Here you can reach the ends of India, where three oceans mingle. See the tiger-prowled hills of the Nilgiris, the Mother Temple of the triple-breasted, fish-eyed goddess and the Mountain of Fire, where god manifests as a pillar of flame. It's all packed into a state that manages to remain fiercely distinct from the rest of India, while exemplifying her oldest and most adventurous edges.

When to Go

Chennai



Jan Pongal
(harvest festival)
celebrations spill
into the streets.

May Head to
the hill stations
for the summer
'season'.

Nov The full-
moon festival of
lights.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Chennai Airport will be your probable point of entry if you're flying into Tamil Nadu from overseas, although Trichy and Coimbatore have (limited) international services. From inside India, there are domestic airports at Chennai, Trichy, Coimbatore and Madurai; these 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 ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

Top Tip

If you need train tickets in a hurry, the Foreign Tourist Assistance Cell at Chennai Central (p327) 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.Com (www.tamilnadu.com) News and directory.
- » Tamil Nadu Forest Department (www.forests.tn.nic.in) National parks, ecotourism and permit information.
- » Tamil Nadu Tourism (www.tamilnadutourism.org)

Food

Tamil Nadu's favourite foods are overwhelmingly vegetarian, with lots of coconut and chilli. No matter where you go you'll find dosas, *idlis* (spongy, round fermented rice cakes) and *vada* (deep-fried lentil-flour doughnuts), all of which are always served with coconut chutney and *sambar* (lentil broth). These will sometimes be your only options, and luckily they're very, very tasty (though you want to eat your *idlis* fresh and warm) – and they're generally vegan friendly, too. *Thalis* – all-you-can-eat meals based around rice, lentil dishes, *rasam* (hot and sour tamarind soup) and chutneys, often served on a banana leaf – are also good, ubiquitous, cheap and filling.

The exception to the all-veg diet is Chettinad food, derived from food traditionally prepared in the southern region around Pudukkottai and Karaikkudi but available at restaurants in most of the bigger towns. Chettinad menus often feature mutton, chicken and fish; it's less fiery and more about the use of fresh spices like cinammon, cumin and star anise. Pepper Chicken is a classic Chettinad dish.

For a state that grows a lot of tea, Tamil Nadu really loves its coffee; filtered coffee (mixed with milk and sugar, of course) is more readily available than tea in many cheap thali joints.

DON'T MISS

Escape from the heat of the plains by taking the **toy train** from Mettapalayam up into the Nilgiri hills; the tracks cut through tropical palms and paddy fields, then through green, monkey-infested jungles, crosses bridges over gushing streams and finally chugs through European-looking forest into the cool of Ooty.

You can't come to Tamil Nadu without admiring its ancient **temples**; see p351 for a selection with the most stunning architecture, rituals and festivals.

Top State Festivals

- » International Yoga Festival (4-7 Jan, Puducherry, p343)
- » Chennai Sangamam (mid-Jan, Chennai, p320)
- » Pongal (mid-Jan, statewide, p312) Harvest festival.
- » International Music festival (Jan, Thiruvaiyaru, p355)
- » Teppam (Float) Festival (Jan/Feb, Madurai, p365)
- » Natyanjali Dance Festival (Feb/Mar, Chidambaram, p350)
- » Chithrai Festival (Apr/May, Madurai, p365)
- » Summer festivals (May-Jun, statewide, p312)
- » Bastille Day (14 Jul, Puducherry, p343)
- » Karthikai Deepam Festival (Nov/Dec, statewide, p312)
- » Chennai Festival of Music & Dance (mid-Dec–mid-Jan, Chennai, p320)
- » Mamallapuram Dance Festival (Dec-Jan, Mamallapuram, p334)