



PARADISE FOUND

in Pondicherry

1. PONDICHERRY'S WATERFRONT



2. THE BASILICA OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

I was gazing at the horizon. The azure waves of the Bay of Bengal were lapping on the silvery sands and just about touching my toes. I was standing on Paradise Beach, one of the most picturesque seashores in Pondicherry.

Like most of my holidays, this one was also a last minute decision. In a bid to pack light, I decided to go cashless and carry a credit card along instead. There was a weekend approaching and I booked my flight tickets. My self-gifted vacation was already off to a great start, for not only did I get my tickets at a reasonable price, but also received cashback on travel portals.

I landed in Chennai in the wee hours of morning, extremely excited about my escapade. Instead of taking a taxi, I decided to rent a car so that I could drive down the beautiful East Coast Road myself over the next three and a half hours. Soaking in the serene views of the Bay of Bengal that stayed with me through the 170 kilometer coastline, I took a quick detour to see Pondicherry's famed Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus church before turning for my hotel; the stained glass panels at the church made for a great introduction to Pondicherry. Excited, I decided to go to the Arulmigu Manakula Vinayagar Temple only to see the numerous Ganesh idols inside and it was a surreal experience. Finally, I made my way to the hotel.

I checked into my hotel situated near the French Quarter, which I had pre-booked using my card. My room was done in a French and colonial style. The charm of the *mise en scène* grew on me. After a cosy afternoon fiesta, I was ready to explore this city stuck in a time capsule.

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I began with walking through the French Quarter. As I strolled past the yellow and purple vintage buildings, the vibrant colours demanded to be clicked. The Alliance Française housed an art gallery and a little café, which was a lovely dollop of yellow. École française d'Extrême Orient had the loveliest doors. I stumbled upon an old French house, with gramophone graffiti on its façade, which turned out to be the much written about Cafe des Arts. I gobbled down waffles and some delicious coffee. Greed got the better of me and I ordered one of their salted crepes. Needless to say, I wasn't disappointed. Fortunately, cards are widely accepted here and I did not hold back.

I spent the rest of my day wandering through the Tamil Quarter's heritage, which was thrice the size of the French Quarter. Old heritage mansions with slopping roofs and interesting porticos were tucked in every corner. I ate at the Maison Perumal. Grilled sea food, soup, appams and fresh vegetables dominated my evening meal and I was asleep before I knew it.

I took the time to visit Auroville on the following day. The Visitor's Centre directed me to all the activities of the day; my first stop was walking in and around Matrimandir. This was followed by a quick visit to the souvenir shop wherein I bought handmade soap, books, and natural foods. I then hit Mission Street and walked into a very chic boutique called Casablanca. My shopping bag was filled with linens and pottery. Needles to say, my luggage wasn't going to be light anymore. However I must admit that, not having to rummage through my wallet for cash was a better way to go.

My last stop was the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I strolled through the tree-shaded courtyard, at the centre of which lay the samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The place is mostly quiet with the exception of a few visitors. In contrast to a buzzing cityscape, I enjoy the laidback lifestyle here.

As the sun set on Paradise beach, my trip to Pondicherry was coming to a close. After a weekend filled with delicious food and mystical colours, I had no heart to return to the bustling madness of a city. My bag was stuffed with goodies and, while my mind was peacefully reminiscing the last few minutes by the beach, I couldn't help but think about how easy it had been to put this trip together despite the last minute planning. I smiled knowing I could count on my card to plan my future vacations.

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3. AERIAL VIEW OF THE CITY



4. THE FRENCH QUARTER

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