

TRAVEL

Delicious dosas and deities in South India

FRUGAL TRAVELER

A youthful energy courses through bustling Chennai, where spirituality is central

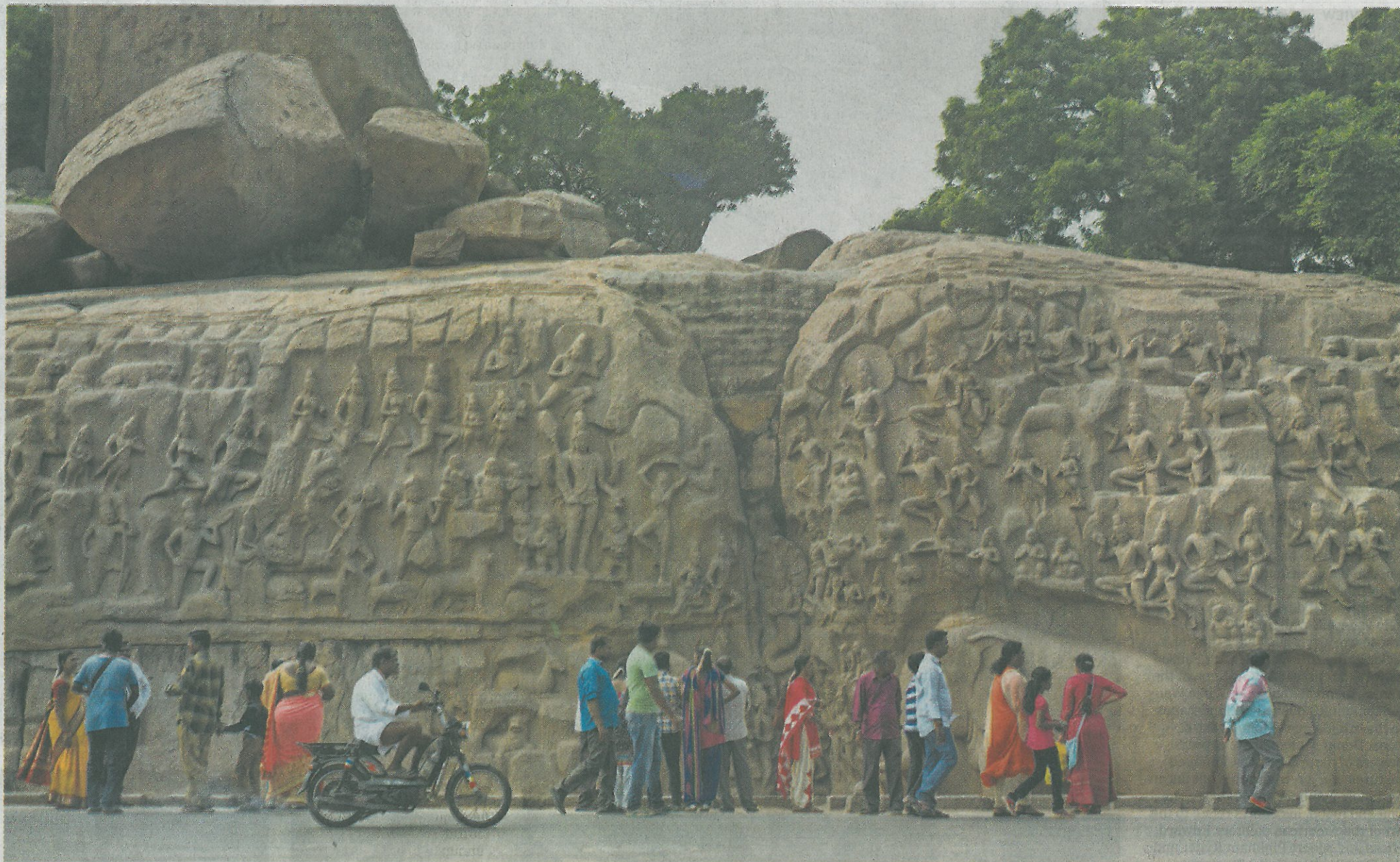
BY LUCAS PETERSON

During the opening weekend of the Tamil-language movie “Chekka Chivantha Vaanam,” a hard-boiled action flick from one of India’s most popular directors, Mani Ratnam, the environment in the theater was more house party than movie screening. From my seat in the far front corner at Sathyam Cinemas (I had scooped up one of the last available tickets), I couldn’t see the film particularly well, but I certainly could hear the whooping and hollering from the packed house when Arvind Swamy, Aishwarya Rajesh or one of the other popular actors appeared on screen.

There’s a lot to be excited about in Chennai, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu in South India, a city still sometimes referred to by its former name, Madras. While certainly crazy for movies, the city has an electricity and exuberance that extends beyond the cinematic. Call it youthful energy — the history of what we know as present-day Chennai extends back merely to the 1600s, compared to ancient cities like Delhi, which have existed for thousands of years. During a four-day trip in September, I found jaw-droppingly good food, beautiful houses of worship and a fantastic day trip. And, as always, I set out with the goal to get the best value for my money.

I booked my ticket from Kolkata to Chennai directly on Air India, paying slightly less than 4,500 rupees (about \$61) for the one-way flight. A general note on buying air tickets: While booking through online travel agencies like Expedia or Priceline has its advantages, I usually try to book flights directly with airlines — I rarely see significantly discounted flights on the online agency sites, and in the event something goes amiss, it’s more efficient to deal directly with the airline.

My room at the centrally located Courtyard Chennai in the Teynampet area was ideal for exploring the city. At 5,100 rupees per night, about \$70, it was a relatively luxurious splurge after having just spent four days in an inexpensive



Mamallapuram is an ancient settlement near Chennai, India, that dates to when the Pallava dynasty ruled southern India from the fourth to the ninth centuries. A highlight is the granite bas-relief known as Arjuna's Penance.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRIYADARSHINI RAVICHANDRAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



national fame following a visit to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, after which he returned home to a hero’s welcome.

Spirituality is an essential part of life in Chennai, and the Arulmigu Kapaleswarar Temple in the Mylapore neighborhood is a must-visit for any visitor. A three-hour walking tour from Sto-

the spiritual guru Mirra Alfassa and is a popular retreat for Westerners.

The Matrimandir, a dimpled, golden spheroid that resembles a giant golf ball, is the meditation center and temple that is center to Auroville’s spiritual life. It’s worth a stop by the small bakery and

cafe Bread & Chocolate while you’re in the area — the 100-rupee honey and cinnamon roll is decadent but delicious.

Puducherry has a stately beauty, and the area surrounding Bharathi Park, also known as the French Quarter, has some gorgeous buildings. After a visit to

Promenade Beach and the French Soldiers War Memorial, my guides and I went for a leisurely walk down Rue François Martin to enjoy the architecture: thick, white columns framing large, imposing doors and pastel-colored walls.

My room at the centrally located Courtyard Chennai in the Teynampet area was ideal for exploring the city. At 5,100 rupees per night, about \$70, it was a relatively luxurious splurge after having just spent four days in an inexpensive Airbnb lodging in Kolkata, but I decided I'd earned a few nights of air-conditioning and fluffy pillows.

My first order of business was to find a killer dosa. The South Indian dosa — a delicate, crepe-like pancake made from



Top, steaming hot dosas. The delicate, crepe-like pancakes are a favorite morning and nighttime dish in Chennai. Above, movie openings often turn into a celebration.

a fermented batter of rice and a variety of legume called urad dal — is a thing of pure majesty. Almost comically large, yet perfectly crispy and whisper-thin at the edges, the slightly sour ferment of the dosa perfectly complements the sambar (lentil stew) and spicy chutneys that frequently accompany it. Or, if you've got a heartier appetite, try the savory potato and onion filling you'll find in a masala dosa.

The ghee masala dosa was my choice from at least a dozen varieties that were on the menu at Sangeetha Veg restaurant, a local vegetarian chain I stumbled on after a quick walk through nearby Jeeva Park. For just 110 rupees, I received a giant scalene triangle of thin, buttery dosa folded around a creamy mixture of potato dotted with mustard seeds. Along with a colorful assortment of chutneys — coconut, coriander and tomato chili are what you'll typically find — it was a perfect midday meal.

Though it did elicit a comment from Maneesh, a stranger with whom I struck up a conversation at our communal table. "Dosas are morning and nighttime things," he told me. I did notice that I was the only one in the dining room eating a dosa during the lunch hour: my mistake. People typically want rice for lunch, Maneesh said.

Fortunately, I met up with a local, James Ramya, who steered me in the right direction. He treated me to a fantastic meal at Ratna Cafe, a cozy restaurant in the Triplicane neighborhood, about a 10-minute walk from the beach. The South Indian set lunch (176 rupees per person), served on a big banana leaf, featured a dozen different stews, vegetable and curd varieties, as well as rice, papadam (a crunchy disc made from black gram flour) and chapati, a type of flatbread, and left us stuffed. The rasam,

a tangy South Indian tamarind-based soup, was particularly delicious.

Another South Indian favorite is idli, a kind of fluffy, fermented rice cake served with various stews and sauces. Murugan Idli (there are a number of branches in Chennai; I went to the Anna Nagar location) was the perfect place to sample the dish. Two idli cost just 36 rupees and I added on a medu vada, a savory, doughnut-like fritter, for another 24 rupees. All in all, it was quite a filling meal for less than a dollar.

I continued my exploration of the upscale Anna Nagar neighborhood on foot, passing brands like Starbucks and Adidas, and making my way past high-end jewelers and clothiers. Nearby Tower

The colorful, ornate entrance tower of the Arulmigu Kapaleeswarar Temple has vivid depictions of Hindu deities.

Park was lovely to stroll through (despite its namesake viewing tower being closed to the public), filled with ice cream vendors and amorous couples seeking shade on a sunny day. A walk on the shore at Marina Beach also provided a great slice of local life: families and children frolicking in the warm waters of the Bay of Bengal, and flat-bottomed boats, faded by the sun, sitting dormant on the broad beach. Small stalls sell cold sodas and much-needed water (25 rupees for a big bottle).

From Marina Beach, the Vivekananda House (20 rupees admission) is a logical next stop. The museum celebrates the life of Swami Vivekananda, a philosopher and spiritual leader who became a fierce proponent of Indian nationalism. He gained inter-

home to a hero's welcome.

Spirituality is an essential part of life in Chennai, and the Arulmigu Kapaleeswarar Temple in the Mylapore neighborhood is a must-visit for any visitor. A three-hour walking tour from Storytrails (booked for \$23 through the website Viator), ably conducted by our guide, Lakshmi Shankar, began just steps from the temple and its colorful, ornate gopuram, or entrance tower.

I could have studied the intricately detailed gopuram for hours, which has vivid depictions of different Hindu gods and goddesses and is repainted every dozen years or so to maintain its bright colors. The temple is primarily dedicated, Ms. Shankar explained, to Shiva, the god of destruction, who destroys through dance. I noticed coconut husks littering the ground in one area of the temple, and she explained that "the head is like a coconut, with a hard exterior, hair and a soft inside." The idea behind smashing coconuts in the temple is to rid the self of pride and ego.

She explained the history of Mylapore, originally a maritime settlement that dates back around 2,000 years, as well as the destruction of the original Kapaleeswarar Temple in the 1500s at the hands of the Portuguese. Today, the area around the temple is lively, full of shops, vendors and tuk-tuks (auto rickshaws) weaving in and out of traffic. After the temple, our small tour group rode in tuk-tuks through the narrow streets to Santhome Church, which claims to have a bone from Thomas the Apostle's hand, as well as the tip of the spear that killed him.

After an interesting discussion on India's caste system (still deeply woven into Indian life, according to Ms. Shankar) and a visit to a Brahmin priest's home, our tour ended on Mada Street at Nithya Amirtham, a casual spot for sweets and snacks. The excellent plain dosa, wrapped into the shape of a dunce cap, and a cup of filter coffee I enjoyed were included in the tour price, but would have cost around 90 rupees.

I stepped out into the busy street, which smelled of flowers and sweets. Vendors sold strings of jasmine, marigolds and vilvam leaf, said to be Shiva's favorite, to take into the temple. I made a quick stop at The Grand Sweets and Snacks and bought a 180-rupee assortment box that contained peda (a milk-based sweet) and a delicious, almond-based badam burfi.

Exploring Chennai itself is rewarding, but the adventurous with a free day will want to explore sites outside of the city. I booked a full-day Hey Travellerz tour of Puducherry (formerly known as Pondicherry) and the nearby town of Auroville through the website Klook for 5,500 rupees after using a five-percent-off promo code that I found online.

On the way, I stopped with my guides at Mamallapuram, an ancient settlement dating to when the Pallava dynasty ruled southern India from approximately the fourth to the ninth centuries. A highlight is the granite bas-relief known as Arjuna's Penance.

Puducherry, about 90 miles south of Chennai, was under French rule until the 1950s, and is known for its colonial-style buildings and tree-lined avenues. Auroville, a self-described "universal town" whose purpose is to "realize human unity," was founded in the 1960s by