

Travel to Pondicherry

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Picture an early morning walk on a pavement along the sea just after sunrise. The summer sun wears a cloudy veil. The breeze is mild and the weather balmy. The delightful setting fires up your limbs and you enjoy a glorious brisk walk. Where could this be? Step into Pondicherry – the erstwhile French colony, now a union territory that lies two and a half-hours away from [Chennai](#) along the East Coast Road (ECR).

The morning walk described above is along the beach promenade, called the Goubert Avenue. This is a fabulous path, separated from the sea by a rocky barrier. The promenade is peppered with benches and one finds contemplative people, friends chatting, strolling tourists and plenty of walkers.

We stayed at my sister-in-law's bungalow, which, with its mango and jasmine trees, was a feast for our Mumbai-bred children. The staircases, terrace and umpteen nooks and crannies kept them well occupied through the vacation. That left me relatively free to explore the charming town with the apt Pondicherry Tourism tagline – Give time a break!

Pondicherry is a curious mix of its [French](#) history and contemporary Tamil setting. It is split into the White Town, which once housed the French rulers, and the Black Town which is the present day marketplace cum residential area. The French Town is laid in the form of a compact grid. The streets have retained their French names - Rue Dupuy, Rue St.Louis or Rue St.Gilles and I could manage the pronunciation solely because they were also spelled in Tamil!

The French Town transports one into an earlier magical era with its leafy streets, colonial bungalows and courtyards spilling over with pink, yellow and white bougainvilleas. The colonial buildings are painted in a distinct pale ochre shade. I was given an extensive tour of the French Institute, which is a painstakingly restored French mansion. The façade of the Institute was obscured by high walls, a distinctive feature of French colonial architecture, but the interiors took my breath away. The open flow of the house within was a sudden contrast to the forbidding exterior. It had modest green spaces in the front and the back – for a courtyard and garden. The library, with massive teak bookcases, was not confined to one room, but spread throughout the mansion with casual seating arrangements. The mansion's architecture, with its French windows and high-ceilinged rooms, was designed to ensure a constant flow of sea breeze that kept it cool even in the hot summer months.

The Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry is a big draw for spiritually-inclined people. It is a restful place with the samadhis of Aurobindo Ghosh and the Mother under the canopy of a single tree. The samadhis are tastefully decorated with flowers and the Ashramites ensure that the wilted flowers are replaced periodically. The entire atmosphere within the ashram is peaceful and subtly enhanced by the fragrant flowers. Auroville, a 30 minute ride from Pondicherry, was set up by the Mother in 1968 as a commune for world citizens living in harmony with nature. A half-day trip to view the densely wooded commune and its treehouses, the Matri Mandir and the solar kitchen is highly recommended.

Pondicherry beckons one to buy her unique wares. The numerous boutiques along Nehru Street and M.G.Road stock incense, candles, lamps, leather goods and jewellery. The heady incense wafting through the boutiques subliminally seduces one to shop!

Pondicherry offers a dash of non-Indian flavour with its French-Tamil mix and this manifests itself in delightful surprises sprinkled through the town. As I bade goodbye, it seemed to lure me into visiting her again - to relive the old memories and create new ones.