

Pondicherry, a breezy oasis on India's Coromandel Coast, has the laid-back feel of a college town—one with an ashram, French colonial architecture, and a particularly benevolent elephant.

From [June 2005](#) By [Nell Freudenberger](#)

If you happen to be in India on your birthday, Pondicherry is the place to spend it. This former stronghold of French India, in the southern coastal state of Tamil Nadu, is now most famous as a site of spiritual pilgrimage. The ashram there, founded in 1926, grew up around the yogi Sri Aurobindo and his French counterpart, Mirra Richard, known to her followers as the Mother. According to her writings, each year, on a person's birthday, the soul ascends, "merges into the Source in order to replenish itself," and "comes down charged for a whole year to pass." I was more concerned about charging the battery in my laptop—but I had resolved to come to Pondicherry with an open mind.

Although April in southern India is the beginning of a humid, punishing summer, Pondy (as it's commonly called) is one of the region's most pleasant and easygoing cities. Especially if you arrive after a tour of Tamil Nadu's spectacular—if dusty and congested—temple towns, Pondy feels like a blessing. Local families sit on the rocks at the seawall, watching the waves; Indian and foreign tourists stroll down the elegant seaside promenade, eating Italian gelato in exotic flavors—lychee, almond, and pistachio. Navigating a path among the bicycles, autorickshaws, mopeds, and careening compact cars is difficult at first, but the Beach Road (which is officially named Goubert Salai) is often closed to traffic. The night I arrived a friend took me up and down the promenade on the back of his moped. "Pondy," he shouted over his shoulder, "is India Lite."

The city, designed and fortified by a series of French governors, is an oval bisected vertically by a canal—which once divided the city into French and Indian districts, the Ville Blanche and Ville Noire. To some extent the division still exists; most of Pondy's luxury hotels and restaurants are located on the east side, in old French colonial buildings that take advantage of the breeze off the ocean. Some of these have been beautifully preserved; L'Hôtel de L'Orient on Rue Romain Rolland is one of those rare Indian hotels that seems to remember the past while acknowledging that the country has moved far beyond it. The staff looks after the rooms (which are filled with French antiques, such as a teak tea box and an enameled armoire) in a style appropriate to the climate—caring, without being especially hurried.

The old French seawall may have served a practical purpose recently: when the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated towns and villages up and down the coast of Tamil Nadu last December, Pondicherry was spared. (The regional government is now using some of its aid money to extend the city's rock barrier farther into the sea). When I learned about the tsunami, I e-mailed friends in the city, most of whom said that they had heard about the disaster in the same way I had, on the Internet. "There was so little sense of danger here," one Pondicherry resident wrote, "that when later there was a rumor of another tidal wave, more people ran toward the beach (to see this unusual natural phenomenon) than away (to save their skins)." The opposite, of course, was

true for the surrounding areas, and the nearby utopian community at Auroville responded with a large-scale relief effort, providing temporary shelter and distributing food and supplies to thousands of victims.

Although I enjoyed Pondy's lovely colonial hotels, I figured that if I really wanted to experience the ashram, I had to stay there too. At the Park Guest House, strictly enforced rules and stern portraits of the ashram's founders suggest a 19th-century sanatorium; at about six dollars a night, however, the view makes it one of the best bargains anywhere. The spartan rooms look directly out over the Bay of Bengal, gray in the early morning, blue as the sun is coming up, and by the afternoon bright green. I had ample opportunity to observe it at every time of day, since by that point in my trip I was experiencing what long-stay backpackers refer to as Delhi Belly. Luckily, the Park's seaside canteen serves dry biscuits and tea. On my first morning there, I discovered that each table is supplied with a bit of the Mother's wisdom encased in Plexiglas, where you might otherwise expect to find the soup of the day: "If we always find mud around us, it proves that there is mud somewhere in us"—an incentive to perk up if there ever was one.

When the French travel writer Alexandra David-Neel visited Pondicherry early in the last century, she described "a dead city that had once been something and remembered it, rigid in its dignity, irreproachably correct, concealing beneath an impeccable coat of whitewash the cracks in the old walls." To her, the city's gardens looked "funereal." Visiting the Botanical Gardens today, you enter a whimsical, secluded space, protected from the street by foliage. The gardens officially open at 9:30 a.m., but there are several gates and innumerable caretakers, some more accommodating than others. A toy train, the Joy Train, snakes passengers through intermittently labeled native and foreign species. Gardeners and other early-morning infiltrators rest on the benches at the stations, like commuters in a somewhat scruffy Wonderland.

During the summer, the best time to go out is early in the morning, when the streets are quiet and cooler, and sweet milk coffee and *idli*, airy rice-flour cakes, served with sambar (curried lentils) and coconut chutney, can be bought from street stalls for a few rupees. As you walk farther west, the French influence recedes, and both the small, village-style houses and concrete block apartments are painted sun-bleached pastels. Tamil movie and political posters are everywhere, highly dramatic and often interchangeable—long before California did it, Tamil Nadu was electing film stars to public office. My trip coincided with the national elections, and Tamil Nadu's chief minister, the former starlet J. Jayalalitha, had just been voted the least popular politician in the country, according to a poll in the weekly *India Today*. Nevertheless, she appeared on poster after poster, smiling jovially underneath her party's double-leaf symbol.

Pondy is full of trees and shrubs: orange flame-of-the-woods, pink and white plumeria, and richly scented frangipani, which releases an almost overpowering sweetness. Walking along South Boulevard, you reach Mahatma Gandhi Road and the Sacred Heart of Jesus church, where the doors and windows are thrown open to worshippers, the breeze off the ocean, and the occasional crow, lighting on the still blade of a ceiling fan.

Before leaving New York, I had read Peter Heehs's absorbing biography of Sri Aurobindo, who was famous as a journalist and freedom fighter before he became the celebrated yogi of Pondicherry. Aurobindo Ghose was born in Calcutta in 1872. When he was seven years old, his

Anglophile father took him and his brothers to England, where he put them under the care of a guardian, stipulating that they not be allowed to "make the acquaintance of any Indian or undergo any Indian influence." Aurobindo distinguished himself at St. Paul's School, in London, and King's College, Cambridge, as a brilliant student of both modern and classical European languages and literature. Contrary to his father's wishes, he also studied Hindi and Sanskrit, and developed an interest in "revolutions and rebellions which led to national liberation." In 1893, he returned to India in the service of the Maharaja of Baroda and soon became a leader in the struggle for his country's independence.

Aurobindo initially saw Indian philosophy as a means to enact political change, and even his decision to settle in Pondicherry was politically motivated. He took refuge in the French Indian city in 1910, after the British government had issued a warrant for his arrest; once in Pondicherry, however, he increasingly devoted his life to writing and the study of yoga. (Sri Aurobindo's "integral yoga" is a complex mental discipline best described in his own exhaustive writings; safe to say it has nothing to do with Downward-Facing Dog.) Soon Indian and foreign devotees began traveling to see the famous yogi, and an ashram grew up in Pondicherry.

I met Aurobindo's biographer, the intense and soft-spoken American ashramite Peter Heehs, at his office in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives on Nehru Street, a blue-gray building with an immaculately maintained courtyard and polished concrete floors. Technically an ashramite is anyone who works in one of the ashram's departments—from the laundry to the dining room to the perfumery (called Auroma)—in exchange for room and board. "Pondy is like a college town, and the ashram is the college," Peter explained, and, except for the afternoon tea-and-cookie break (during which the devotees heatedly discussed Tamil politics), the archives did have the atmosphere of a particularly light and airy university library.

On the second floor, Indian, European, and American ashramites were working on a colossal project: the publication of the corrected works of Sri Aurobindo in 36 volumes. After retiring from politics, Aurobindo famously spent 24 years shut away in three small rooms, writing poems and essays that carefully recorded the progress of his yoga. In an air-conditioned office, Richard, a bearded American Sanskrit scholar dressed in white, was examining these texts with monklike patience. "Sometimes I have to look over a hundred instances of a word to determine precisely what Aurobindo meant by it," he told me gravely.

"We do get things done," Peter assured me, after we got downstairs to the high-ceilinged office that serves as the ashram's publishing house. Medha, a cheerful Aurobindo devotee from Mumbai, working in front of floor-to-ceiling shelves of manuscripts, laughed and interjected, "But I think that's because of grace."

Temple elephants, who will snuffle up your rupees with their lavishly decorated trunks and then give you a blessed pat on the head, are ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu; the one at the Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple just down the street from the ashram is particularly friendly. After we left the temple, Peter took me to the ashram bookshop, SABDA, which is stocked with literature on Hinduism, Sanskrit scholarship, and, of course, the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Curious visitors (those not quite curious enough for the complete 36 volumes) can also sample the founders' wisdom in the form of pamphlets devoted to particular topics. I passed over "How

to Cultivate Concentration," "Know Thyself and Forget Thyself," and "The Mother on Desires" in favor of "Happy Birthday," feeling as if I were buying Cliff's Notes in front of an English teacher.

"It's my birthday," I said defensively.

Peter looked startled. "But why didn't you say something? We have to get you a pass!"

Friends had told me that I would need a pass for nearly everything in the ashram—to sleep in the guesthouse, to eat (in strictly maintained silence) in the ashram dining room, and to meditate near the Mother and Aurobindo's tomb—but this seemed to be taking things a bit far.

"I need a pass to have my birthday?" I asked.

Peter explained that your birthday is the only day of the year that you can visit Aurobindo's preserved and sealed-off rooms. He checked his watch. "We have to hurry," he said. "It might be too late."

We rushed to a small office in the ashram's main building, where a birthday pass giving ashramite graciously made an exception and issued me a ticket for the following morning. "After all," Peter reasoned, "it will still be your birthday in America."

Before coming to Pondicherry, I had visited a friend in Mumbai, Pheroza Godrej, an elegant Parsi woman in her nineties. We sat in her courtyard apartment on Hughes Road, eating rapidly melting strawberry ice cream, while Pheroza described her own visit to Pondicherry more than a half century earlier, when Aurobindo was still alive: "They're all the time saying, 'Make your darshan and keep moving, keep moving,'" she remembered. "But how can you move when his eyes are on you? You're fixed to the spot."

Of course, darshan—a blessing received by viewing a holy person—is a little different once the holy man is no longer there. When you enter the ashram courtyard, the first thing you see is the samadh—the marble tomb that holds the remains of Aurobindo and the Mother—which is perpetually covered with flowers. The private rooms upstairs are kept just as they were when Aurobindo was alive. When I arrived with my birthday pass at 9:30 the next morning, the staircase to the inner sanctum was already crowded with people, some of them holding marigolds and roses as offerings. At the appointed moment, we were allowed to file silently into the guru's rooms.

Like my paternal grandmother, Sri Aurobindo seems to have been crazy for collectibles. I saw vitrines crowded with carved ivory elephants, Greek amphorae, and Dresden figurines—all gifts from devotees. Unlike my grandmother, Aurobindo owned six or seven large tiger heads, with open jaws and glass eyes, which he kept lined up on a table in the antechamber. Inside the room everything had been preserved: the chair where the yogi received visitors; his bed, covered with a pink nylon spread; his fan and goosenecked reading lamp. We sat in silence for about 15 minutes in front of a large portrait of Aurobindo as an old man; afterward, the ashramites dismissed us with fresh garlands, birthday cards, and tiny sepia portraits of the Mother.

Although visitors often confuse the ashram at Pondicherry with its neighbor Auroville, the two are entirely separate entities. A bumpy, 20-minute ride away, by white Ambassador taxi, Auroville was founded as an international community in 1968. Today its 1,700 residents come from more than 35 countries and live in dramatically varied settlements—everything from cashew farms to avant-garde art studios to Florida-style condos—spread out in a rough spiral over 10 square miles of land. Philosophically, Auroville is distinct from the ashram, dedicated not to Aurobindo's Integral Yoga but to the Mother's vision of international "human unity."

Those with a serious interest are encouraged to stay and work in the community, but even a day trip from Pondicherry is rewarding. Auroville is home to a number of architects who have let their imaginations loose; the public buildings (particularly the ultramodern Bharat Nivas, an Indian cultural center, and the new town hall) are unlike any others in the world. Because the community's geography is confusing, it's best to either begin with a tour from the visitors' center—or make an Aurovillian friend. As Anu Majumdar, a novelist from Calcutta who has lived in Auroville for 30 years, put it: "You can't see Auroville from the road."

What you can see, from quite a distance, is the 95-foot-high Matrimandir, the enormous sphere covered with gold-plated discs that marks the center of the community. The Aurovillians have been laboring to complete this monument to their founder's vision since the early seventies, and they're still putting on the finishing touches. After obtaining another pass, from the kiosk inside the gate, you enter the structure and follow the spiral walkway up to a dim inner chamber, where an attendant provides you with a pair of regulation white socks. Inside the chamber, you sit on white cushions around the Mother's globe—a flawless crystal sphere, illuminated by a single beam of light from a skylight directly overhead. Aurovillians will tell you that the Matrimandir is not for formal meditation; in the words of the Mother, it's something simpler, "a place...for trying to find one's consciousness."

Most people don't come to Auroville for the beach, but the community's stretch of coastline is palm-fringed and lovely. There are few visitors, especially during the hot season, and staring at the sea provides a welcome break from other spiritual labors. Just off the beach, at the Quiet Healing Center, I tried a hatha yoga class in a bright, high-ceilinged studio. After a rigorous hour in the 90-degree heat, I decided to sign up for a massage. I followed a Tamil masseuse up to a thatched hut on the roof, where she immediately changed from her sari into a T-shirt and shorts, then instructed me: "You—everything but panties!" I anticipated something painful and healthy, and was pleasantly surprised by the soothing strokes of the ayurvedic technique. The massage hut (equipped with a ceiling fan fastened to a beam) kept out the sun and circulated the breeze. The only drawback was the copious amount of oil; by the time I left, an hour later, I had become a sort of human samosa.

On my last night, I returned to Pondicherry proper to attend the evening meditation at the Aurobindo ashram. At the appointed time, an ashramite rang a brass bell and all the lights went out, except for one blue lamp above the samadh. In the dark, the tips of the incense sticks glowed like tiny orange pairs of eyes. The noise from outside the walls—autorickshaw horns, bells of the street hawkers, someone's cell phone playing "Für Elise"—seemed truly separate from what was going on inside. That community and its guests, sitting together in perfect silence, represented

another version of what I love about India: its proud variety, the distinctness of each particular place. India Lite, perhaps, but hardly the dead city of its colonial past.