

# UNION TERRITORY OF PONDICHERRY

The Union Territory of Pondicherry is constituted out of the four erstwhile French settlements of **Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe** and **Yanam** regions. Pondicherry is located 160 Kms. south of Chennai and is surrounded by Cudallore and Villupuram districts of Tamilnadu. Karaikal lies about 150 Kms. south of Pondicherry and is located within Nagapattinam district of Tamilnadu. Mahe region is located on the Kerala coast and lies on the borders of Kozhikode and Kannoor districts of Kerala. Yanam is on the banks of the river Goringa Godavari and is situated within the east Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. There are no hills or forests in this region. The main soil types in this region are red ferrallitic, black clay and coastal alluvial. Main languages spoken in the region are Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam. English and French are other languages, which are spoken by a considerable number of people. Majorities of the people are Hindus. There are quite a number of Christians and Muslims, whereas very few Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists.



## **The Union Territory of Pondicherry consists of**

- Pondicherry the capital, 162 kms South of Chennai on the East coast of South India.
- Karaikal, 132 kms South of Pondicherry.
- Yanam, in the East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh, and
- Mahe, in the Cannanore District of Kerala.

The origin of Pondicherry is buried in legends. According to one view, the town was once called Vedapuri and was a seat of Vedic culture, and the abode of Sage Agastya. Prof. Jonvean Dubrouil, the French archeologist believes that the Ashram of Agastya was on the very spot where the main building of Sri Aurobindo Ashram stands today.

Remnants of an ancient port town have been excavated at Arikamedu, 6 kms from Pondicherry town, clearly proving that it had trade connections with Rome and Greece, around the period 100 BC and 100 AD. Pondicherry continued to flourish even during the Chola period, as the discovery of the Chola coins from the eleventh and twelfth centuries indicate. These Chola coins and the artefacts from the excavations at Arikamedu can be viewed in the Pondicherry Museum.

### **Modern Pondicherry**

The history of modern Pondicherry starts with the arrival of the French in 1673, who ruled for most part of the next 281 years.

### **The French Heritage**



Pondicherry has a rich French cultural heritage, having been the capital of the French colonies in India since the 17th century. Pondicherry, Karaikal, Yanam and Mahe were transferred to the Indian Union in 1954.

This French legacy is visible in the well-planned town, neatly laid roads, wide and vibrant beaches, beautiful promenades, architecturally imposing churches and public buildings and statues of Joan of Arc and Josep Francois Dupleix who was the Governor of the French colonies in India from 1742-54. The town also has an Alliance Francaise and the French Institute.

Among the notable French personalities who left their indelible mark on Pondicherry, four names stand out. Francois Martin who was appointed the Administrator after the Treaty of Ryswick, brought stability and was responsible for its growth. Dumas, who succeeded him, built on Martin's foundations. The third notable Frenchman was Joseph Francois Dupleix, the Governor of French India from 1742-54.

The fourth French personality who made an impact on modern day Pondicherry was 'The Mother', a Paris-born painter-musician and Sri Aurobindo's close companion from 1920 until his death in 1950. She was responsible for developing the Ashram as it is today.

### **A Lot to See. A Lot to Do.**



## SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM:

The main attraction of Pondicherry is Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Sri Aurobindo who was the stalwart freedom fighter of the pre- Gandhian era, following spiritual Adesh (voice or order) came to Pondicherry in 1910, then a French territory, and remained here forever practicing Yoga. He was later joined by a French lady, Mirra known as the Mother. After the Mother's coming, the followers increased in number and the Ashram came into being. After Sri Aurobindo's retirement to recluse in 1926, Mother shouldered the entire responsibility of the Ashram. Ever since, the Ashram has grown in leaps and bounds and today there are about 2000 inmates- Sadhakas practicing in action the integral or supramental yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

The main Ashram building where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's samadhis are enshrined is open to public from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. with a recess from 12.00 noon to 3.00 p.m. Anyone who happens to be there by 9.00 a.m. can take special permit and visit the room where Sri Aurobindo resided and his splendid spiritual work. The things used by Sri Aurobindo and a rare collection of beautiful artifacts are kept there. In the reception counter the books of Sri Aurobindo are on sale. One could also buy pictures, calendars and diaries there - all connected with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The information center will give you all details. The educational institutions run by the ashram, the gymnasia and the playground activities and the cultural programmes and exhibitions organized every now and then by the Ashram could also be seen after obtaining permit from the reception counter. One can also take one's breakfast, lunch and dinner in the Ashram dining hall by paying a small amount. Ashram guest- houses scattered nearby provide accommodation too at reasonable rates and most of them would be full- only early birds will find a niche in them.

There are some important days observed in the Ashram and public are allowed to have darshan of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's rooms. Thousands of devotees will gather on those days. The most important days are:

1. January 1st - Prosperity day
2. February 21st - Mother's Birthday
3. August 15th - Sri Aurobindo's Birthday
4. November 17th - The Mother's Samadhi Day
5. November 24th - Supramental Day
6. December 5th - Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi Day

### Beach:

Pondicherry is on the coast of the Bay of Bengal and the 1500 meter stretch beach is an ideal place for swimming and sunbathing. 4 meter tall statue of Mahatma Gandhi, a beautiful artificial mountain park near the Ashram playground, the statue of Pondicherry's illustrious governor Duplex and the War Memorial built by the French to commemorate the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the victory of the First World War, the 150-year-old lighthouse are other attractions of the beach. The beach is maintained clean and of late boulders have been erected to prevent sea-erosion. Sri Aurobindo Society's beach office and the Pondicherry Government Tourist Office are on the beach road.

### French Institute:

The only present link with France in Pondicherry is this institute. It is an internationally acclaimed institute on Dumas Street founded in 1955 by Dr. J. Fillozet, the renowned French Indologist. It has a brilliant collection of

rare books on Science, Technology, Ecology, Cartography, Pedagogy, Indian languages and culture. The Romain Rolland Library run by the government has a collection of 60,000 books some of them being rare French volumes.

### JIMPER:

Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Post-graduate Medical Education and Research, started in 1979, it is one of the most prestigious institutions of its kind in India. This is one of the foremost medical institutions in the country and is located at the western entry point to Pondicherry. This place is called Gorimedu. Botanical Garden: The botanical garden planned by C.S.Perrotet in 1826 is near the old bus stand off the West Boulevard. It has a good collection of exotic flower plants, both alien and indigenous. There is a toy rail to amuse children and the Jawahar Bal Bhavan- a unique all- India organization to train children in various arts is also located here.

### AQUARIUM:

Another attraction in the Botanical Garden is the aquarium which has some rare species of ornamental fish.

### MUSEUM

The 1984 museum near the park facing the beach houses the antiques apart from the Roman coins and other articles of Roman origin unearthed from Pondicherry. This reveals the connections of ancient times. There are also sections of archeology, geology, and sculpture, handicrafts, artifacts, ornaments and things obtained in Arikamedu, a place in the nearby village Ariyankuppam. The bed used by Duplex, a palanquin and a pousse-pousse that resembles a hand-pulled rickshaw are also on display.

## PARK

There is a well laid out park facing the beach and opposite the governor's residence. Most people take rest during the afternoon under the shady trees. The statues of Bharathiar and Bharathidasan have been erected here. One main attraction is the sculpture park interspersed in the garden with beautiful images and ornamental pillars looted by Duplex from Gingee. In the center is a cenotaph, raised by Napoleon, called Ayi Memorial-a woman who donated her tank to quench the thirst of people which is now the symbol of Pondicherry. Bharathiar & Bharathidasan Memorials: The national poet Bharathi took asylum in Pondicherry when the British atrocities against freedom fighters were rampant. The house where he lived in Pondicherry on the Dharma Raja Koil Street has been converted into a fine memorial by the Pondicherry government. Rare photographs, manuscripts written in Bharathiar's own hand, volumes of his works and the papers he published are on display. Some of the things he used and some rare photographs of his associates are also on display. Bharathidasan, the true revolutionary poet and disciple of Bharathiar is a native of Pondicherry. The house where he resided has also been converted into a fitting memorial in Bharathidasan Road.

## ANANDHARANGAM PILLAI'S HOUSE

The famous dubash who was right hand to Duplex and who recorded the events of his days in his diary. Anandharangam Pillai's house could be seen in Ranga Pillai Street. The beautiful ornamental carvings on tables and stately doors with carvings and the articles used by him are on display here.

## TEMPLES

There are several temples in Pondicherry town and nearby villages built by the Cholas between 10th and 12th centuries dedicated to local village gods.

In Madagadippattu village, a beautiful temple with excellent art works was found in the excavation. In Bhahur, another village, once a centre of Sanskrit-learning flourished during the Pallava period. The Varadharaja temple is the heart of the town is a Vishnu shrine of the Chola period built in the 12th century. There is a Chola inscription here that speaks of a Sanskrit university. There is a Siva temple known as Ambalathu Adigal Mutt temple nearby. The Kimbili Swami Mutt temple a little away has a rare sculpture which is a unique pose of Siva and Mahakali dancing together in unison. The Siddhanta Swami Samadhi temple near the burial ground is famed in one of the songs of poet Bharathiar. One can see the statues in stucco of all the siddhas and saints in this temple where people of all faiths visit. Thirukkameswara temple in the nearby Villiyanur is a Siva temple built by the Cholas in the 12th century. The annual festival of this temple held in May-June attracts thousands of devotees.

The most famous and important temple of Pondicherry is the Manakkula Vinayagar temple near Aurobindo Ashram. It was originally an idol planted near a "manal kulam"- sandy tank. The legend is that the early European settlers wanted to remove it from there and they had actually thrown it several times into the sea. After each throwing, the deity appeared in the same place the next day. This caused some concern among them and they abandoned the idea. Later on, the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram donated lands for building the temple in a fitting manner. Poet Bharathiar has sung a beautiful prabhandam (poetic work) on this deity. Mural painting of all ganapathis could be seen around the corridors.

In Thiruvamathur village is the famous Vattaparai Amman. It is a round-shaped rock and in olden times if any dispute arose instead of going to court they came here and standing before the deity will tell only the truth and nothing but the truth. The deity is supposed to be so powerful that any false witness would be severely dealt with by Amman, so none dared to utter falsehood. Many disputes were thus solved here.

## CHURCHES

There are a number of beautiful churches in Pondicherry. The most beautiful is the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on south Boulevard. It is a Gothic style church with three stained glass panels in a corridor behind the altar depicting the life of Christ. The English de Notre Dam des Anges on Dumas Street built in 1865 has an oil painting of our lady of Assumption donated by Napoleon III. Another famous church is the one called the Englise de Notre Dame des Lourdes in Villiyanur. It has been built exactly as the Basilica at Lourdes in France. The local Tamilians call it Villiyanur madha church. The church festival in June attracts lakhs of devotees to all faiths. There is also a tank, the only one of its kind in a church in India.

## AUROVILLE

The city of dawn is the brainchild of the Mother designed by the well known French architect Roger Onger. Its aim is an international community living in amity despite all creeds, politics and nationalities. The inauguration was on 28 February 1968 when the President of the Indian Union and representatives of 121 nations came to pour the soils of their lands in a lotus-shaped urn symbolic of universal oneness. About 500 people from different countries live in 40 settlements of Auroville. The best way to go round this vast area is to hire a bicycle and set on an adventurous expedition. Near Matri Information centre is a 25 hectare farm and orchard successfully practicing organic agriculture without using chemicals and factory fertilizers. The produce is utilised in the kitchen at Auroville as well as the Ashram.

Matri mandir is the main attraction of Auroville. It is a huge globe-like structure visible everywhere in Auroville. Its construction is still going on and it is a place of meditation. In the hall, a huge crystal ball is kept which glows absorbing the natural light- a crystal to gaze and meditate. When it is completed it would be one of the wonders of the world. The Mother has conceived it as a temple of truth and inaugurated the work which still continues. Public are allowed to have a look at the progressing mandir and at particular hours to meditate before the crystal ball- a unique experience indeed!

### NEARBY PLACES OF EXCURSION

- Gingee
- Thiruvannamalai
- Sathanur Dam
- Thiruvakkarai
- Sanyasikuppam
- Nandaga Pattu
- Cuddalore
- Thiruvahindrapuram
- Vadalur
- Thiruvadigai