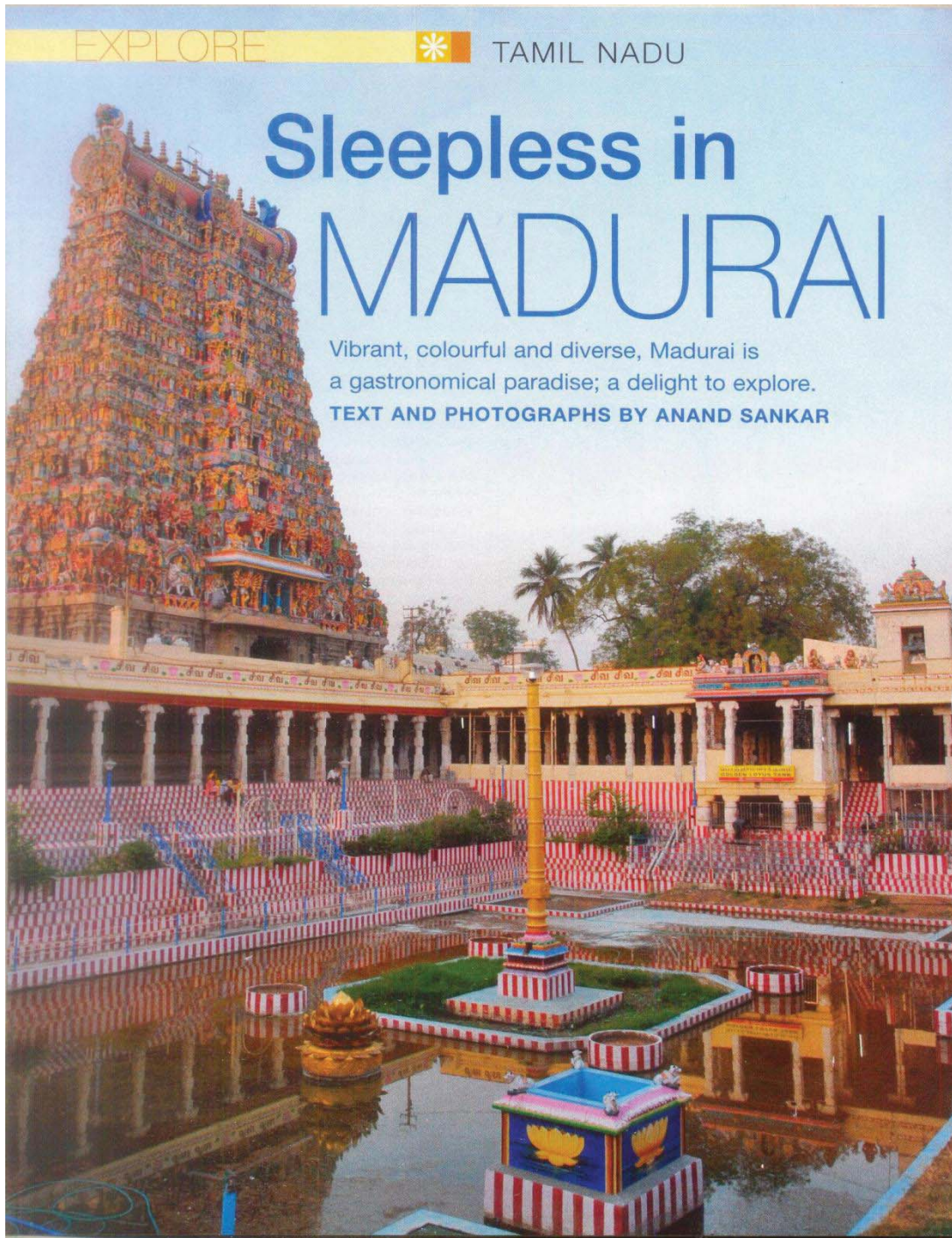


Fam Trip	
Publication	India Today Travel Plus
Date	May 2010 Issue
Page No	68



EXPLORE



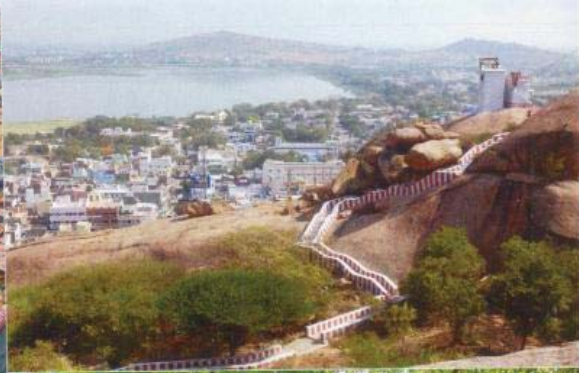
TAMIL NADU

Sleepless in MADURAI

Vibrant, colourful and diverse, Madurai is a gastronomical paradise; a delight to explore.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANAND SANKAR

Fam Trip	
Publication	India Today Travel Plus
Date	May 2010 Issue
Page No	69



CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE The famous Meenakshi Temple; exotic detail from the temple; visit the scenic Thiruparankundram temple; a Junior Villa at Heritance hotel; buying Madurai jasmine



IT IS HARD TO MISS the temple town imprint on Madurai. Driving into the city, the most prominent directions are to the focal point, the Meenakshi-Sundareswarar Temple, followed by the assortment of smaller places of worship that dot the city and its periphery. The typical hustle and bustle associated with a place of pilgrimage is ever-present. Yes, it can be a harsh sensory overload if you are a first-time visitor. Finding time and space to yourself in Madurai, immediately, can be tough indeed.

That is precisely the reason I felt some R&R (rest and rejuvenation) should be first on order as soon as I set foot here. It's easier to achieve that agenda if your room comes with a pool. The city's newest hotel, Heritance Madurai, promised a breath of fresh air, and a couple of hours lazing around in the floral-scented plunge pool delivered exactly that. The Heritance is Madurai's first luxury spa and resort, located in an expansive campus on the fringes of the heart of the city (not the outskirts) and it seemed the right kind of launch pad to explore the city from.

The spanking-new Heritance follows on from the Heritance brand's critically-acclaimed properties in Sri Lanka. The 70-plus capacity resort, has been designed in accordance with the legendary Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa's "tropical modernism" design philosophy. Distilled, the essence of the design is raw minimalism. Design cues

Fam Trip	
Publication	India Today Travel Plus
Date	May 2010 Issue
Page No	70

EXPLORE

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taken from Madurai's temple and Chettinad architecture, which is the granite pillars, flooring and tiled roofs, have been pared down to go with the minimalist theme. The rough-hewn granite pillars and rough-finished outdoor flooring is a visual delight. Indoors meanwhile, the rooms while retaining the minimalist theme, offer feather-soft beds and wooden flooring. Also, the rooms incorporate a "public private space" concept, wherein you have plunge pools that are open to the sky and toilets and baths kept private by cleverly-placed walls rather than doors.

"We want to bring an entirely new concept and experience to Madurai. We felt definitely there is space for such a property in Madurai, as the city has a lot of potential as a destination," said S Thiagarajan, CEO, ETL Infrastructure Services, who have developed the property, with operational expertise and branding from the Heritance brand, which is owned by the Sri Lanka-based Aitken Spence Hotel Managements.

Taking the first steps into Madurai city, I decided to first sign off the obvious from my list. Up bright early at sunrise, I set off to explore the famed Meenakshi Temple. My enterprising taxi driver seemed to sense my mood and upon nearing the temple suggested, "Sir, can I take you in through the north entrance? It is the least crowded. The east and south will be packed because they are considered auspicious." I didn't disagree. The wildly-coloured carvings on the north tower were resplendent in the morning light. The temple renovation finished just a few months ago.

There is no denying the magnificence of the temple's architecture, especially the exquisite carvings in the 1000-pillar hall. But it doesn't take long to realise that the temple renovation job has been overdone. The biggest eyesores are the ugly iron railings erected for security and crowd control. The lotus pond is the biggest casualty, with its view destroyed. The ambience in the temple was far removed from a visit in the past. It is impossible to now grab a nap in one of the cool courtyards or for children to have fun just running around from pillar to pillar. Thankfully, the chirping of numerous birds lent some soul to the ambience and it is always fun to press a coin into the temple elephant's trunk, to get blessings.

A lot more interesting to explore are Madurai's two other big temples, Alagar Kovil and Thiruparankundram. Both are located on hillocks at Madurai's northern-eastern and south-western extremities. I explored both early in the morning on two separate days to beat the blazing summer sun. Dedicated to the god Vishnu, Alagar Kovil, which again features some exquisite carvings, is set in a lush-




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green sacred forest. The temple is at the base of the hill, while on top is a freshwater spring, whose water, the locals will swear, has infinite medicinal properties. Meanwhile, Thiruparankundram is home to another unique distinction. While at the bottom of the hill is a temple for the Murugan, son of Shiva, at the top is the 14th-century dargah, which houses the grave of the Islamic saint Hazrat Sultan Sikandhar Badhusha.

The dargah is not the only Muslim shrine in Madurai. The city has an Islamic heritage that is equally important as the Hindu one. The religious hierarchy in Madurai gives equal credence to the Aadheenam (the Hindu head) and the Kaziyar (Muslim head), and they are followed by the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Madurai, who compared to the other two, has a smaller following. Thus, it is worth visiting the Kazimar Mosque in the heart of Madurai, near the main temple, and the Goripalayam dargah, where, curiously, people come with padlocks as offerings to the graves of saints.

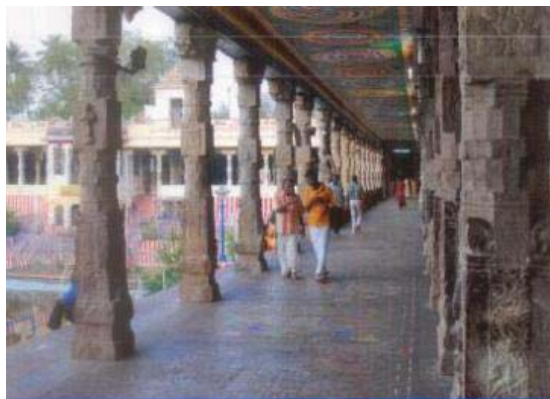
At this point I began to learn there is much more to Madurai than just temples. Just a stone's throw from Thiruparankundram, I stumbled across

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AROUND MADURAI

Visit Idaikattur, 30 km away, for Sacred Heart Shrine, a replica of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Reims, France. The church was built by a French missionary Father Ferdinand Celler in 1894. The church's architecture, especially the gothic arches, is quite a sight in the idyllic village on the banks of the river Vaigai. The road to Idaikattur is quite scenic with lush green paddy fields and tamarind trees on either side. On the way back you can visit the village of Tirupachi, famous for manufacturing TN's favourite machete.

Fam Trip	
Publication	India Today Travel Plus
Date	May 2010 Issue
Page No	71



CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE BELOW *The pool at Heritance; the aesthetically designed rooms; this is a city for the spiritually inclined*

a village called Kaithirinagar, which when translated means 'weavers colony'. It is home to weavers from Saurashtra who came to settle in Madurai in the 14th and 15th centuries. They are said to have brought with them the knowhow to practice the tie-and-dye. Over the centuries the weavers have assimilated into local culture but retain their spoken language, Saura Seni (which I am told is extinct in Saurashtra now), and their cuisine. The village lanes resonate with the "clackety-clack" of handlooms and a weaver Kumaran was happy to show me around his home, whose centrepiece is the massive loom.

There is precious little architecture, apart from the temples, that has survived in Madurai. Almost all the old houses have been razed for modern structures. But again it was my driver, whose name I now learnt was aptly Shiva, who took me to see a stately old wooden house located near the Madura Coats textile factory, which is a city landmark. Called a Kodai House, it is a grand building featuring intricate woodwork, and the style it seems was once preferred by the wealthy in the city. Then there are a few Saurashtra-style houses, which seem straight out of Rajkot, in the areas around Pandhadi Street, once home to handloom weavers.

But what rocks the most in Madurai is the food. You can just visit the city to eat. It is in fact quite hard to decide where to begin describing food in Madurai. You start a typical day with steaming-hot feather-soft idlis and crisp brown dosas from any of the thousands of roadside eateries. Skip drinking water at these pavement joints and you will find the hygiene is good. Lunch, if you can stomach it, can be a Chettinad meat feast, which is as hardcore as it gets. My driver revelled in fish, prawns, crab, shark, chicken,



mutton, pigeons and rabbits while I dropped into College House, a landmark near the main temple, for a traditional Brahmin thali. For dessert, the local drink *jigarthanda* is a must. It is a heady mix of cold milk, agar agar, sugar, a flavoured syrup, kesar-pista ice cream and soaked *sabudana*.

At nightfall, the city's eateries don a new avatar. Madurai's evening cuisine is exclusive and restaurants start only by 7p.m. and stay open till 4a.m., giving the city the nickname *Thoonga Nagaram* (sleepless city). And considering the food on offer, it is no surprise you have to stay up the night to eat and then walk about for effective digestion. Starters again were idlis and onion *uthappams* at the unimpeachable Murugan Idly Shop on West Masi Street. Apart from the best food, the restaurant makes a spicy chutney powder to die for. The evening main course staple is *parota*, *appams* or the *aska*, a form of biryani, which are served with spicy chutneys and *kurnas*. The king is the *kothu parota*, a scrambled parota.

Madurai has definitely grown beyond what its original creators intended centuries ago. It is today far from the lotus-shaped city that was envisioned. Moving out of town, my driver pointed to new glass and concrete structures on the city's outskirts. They were buildings for technology parks, the city's new "temples". And then my attention was drawn to massive billboards featuring a politician, which are all over the city. To that, my driver quipped in typical Madurai humour, "He is the new deity". ●

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Madurai airport and railway station are connected to all major cities of the country.

WHEN TO GO

All year round, except April-June, which can be very hot.

PLUS SAYS

STAY

► *Heritance Madurai* (0452-238 5455) resort and spa is tailor-made for a leisure traveller.

EAT

For a Chettinad meat feast drop into *Amma Mess and Kumar Mess* at *Mattuthavani* (lunch and dinner), and *Konar Kadai* near the railway station (dinner only).

SHOP

Buy handloom saris at the city's oldest stores in *Thevang Chattram* on *Kamaraj Road* (near City Cinema).

SEE

An early morning hike up the *Thiruparankundram* hillock is best if you want a bird's eye view of Madurai.