MADURAI MYSTIQUE

From Sangam-age relics to vibrant *gopurams* and from pulsating festivals to tantalising cuisine, this pilgrimage hub in Tamil Nadu has its own brand of timeless charm

words by **Punita Malhotra**

The cab driver navigates the busy markets of Tamil Nadu's third-largest and oldest city. We drift past signboards advertising Sungudi cotton sarees, see the locals sipping their filter coffee, and pass by women selling jasmine garlands on the streets. I try to imagine the silhouette of the ancient city of Madurai, as described in ancient Tamil classics. A gigantic central temple and the surrounding streets shaped like a lotus with blossomed petals. According to legend, the city was planned around the revered temple, which was built by Pandyan king Kulasekara, and once flourished as a centre of literature, music, and dance. Poets, artists, and scholars, including the Greek historian Megasthenes, visited from far and wide, lured by its fame and splendour. I can't wait to find out why.

ENCOUNTER THE DIVINE

First things first. I start with the Meenakshi Amman Temple, dedicated to Goddess Meenakshi (literally meaning fish-eyed), an incarnation of the Hindu Goddess Parvati, and her consort, Sundareshwar, a form of Lord Shiva. The gigantic Dravidian-style temple is a work of art with lofty *gopuram*s (towers) and four main entrances facing the cardinal directions. Thousands of vibrantly-painted stone statues depicting animals, gods, and demons line the walls of 14 towers, the tallest of which soars to 170 feet. Jaw dropping continues at the Aayiram Kaal Mandapam or '1000-pillar hall', which also functions as a museum. My guide informs me that the

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LEFT AND RIGHT
The city of Madurai was built around the Meenakshi Temple; The Thirumalai Nayak Palace, the royal residence of the last ruling dynasty.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
The gentle giants of Meenakshi Amman Temple; A red painted pottery, unearthed from Keeladi's archaeological site; Fresh flowers at the flower market.

original temple from the 4th century CE was destroyed by foreign conquerors and rebuilt in the 16th century. I couldn't spot the difference... it's perfect. Hours pass as I admire the sculptures and decode the legends painted in kaleidoscopic colours.

I am advised to wait till nightfall to witness a mesmeric ancient ritual of devotion. I use that time to visit the Thirumalai Nayak Palace, a 17th-century royal residence of the last dynasty that ruled Madurai. When I return after an eye-popping interlude, the atmosphere changes dramatically. Amid flaming torches, pealing bells, and floating incense, a queue of chanting priests appear. It is a procession carrying the idol of Lord Shiva on a palanquin to the inner sanctum, where

He is to be reunited with Meenakshi. I follow the elaborate celebration of the divine union, amazed to know that it has been practised for centuries. A pulsating rhythm of faith, celebration, and community is in the air. Curiously, I feel an all-pervading calm.

SEEK FESTIVE THRILLS
Deeply rooted in Tamil culture, the Jallikattu festival is a spectacle of courage and strength, where young men attempt to grab hold of a bull's hump and hang on for dear life. The atmosphere in the arena is electrifying. I am ushered to join an excited crowd, whistling and cheering the participants on. Heavy doses of adrenaline? No, deep-rooted traditions. The hysteria seems to fade as I realise that this is no

Do not miss
One of the most spectacular celebrations of Madurai, the annual Chithirai Festival is held in the Tamil month of **Chithirai (April/May)**. According to legend, Lord Vishnu, as Alagar, rode on a golden horse to Madurai to attend the **wedding of Goddess Meenakshi** with **Lord Sundareswarar (Lord Shiva)**.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Traditional filter coffee in a brass set; The crab omelette is a unique and satisfying offering; Crisp medu vada with chutney.

ordinary sporting event. It reflects the human-animal bond and symbolises reverence for the bull, the lifeline of the agrarian community at large.

DIG INTO THE PAST

That afternoon, I head to the tiny hamlet of Keeladi, located along the Vaigai river. The Keeladi excavations are leftovers of the Sangam-era civilisation that thrived here from 300 BCE to 300 CE. I wander along remnants of brick houses, terracotta drainage systems, roofing tiles, and finger-pressed grooves used to drain rainwater, marvelling at the well-planned urban landscape. I pore over 15,000 artefacts at the nearby Keeladi Heritage Museum. There are beads, iron tools, terracotta figurines, gold ornaments, copper articles, earthenware shells, a punch-marked silver coin, and clay pots inscribed with Tamil Brahmi script!

GORGE ON DELICACIES

A visit to Madurai would be incomplete without sampling its bold flavours. The Madurai idli, a soft and fluffy rice cake, is almost mandatory. At Visalam coffee shop in Chinna Chokkikulam, I indulge myself with a robust, aromatic filter *kaapi* (South Indian coffee), pairing it with a crisp *vadai*. On another occasion, I savour a delicious crab omelette at Muniyandi Vilas. The combination of fresh crab meat, eggs, and spices creates a satisfying dish. Seafood lovers should try the local favourite, Ayirai Meen (fish curry), at Amma Mess. Also, try *jigarthanda*, a refreshing summer drink made with milk, almond gum, sugar, and ice cream.

As the day ends, I reflect on the city's culture steeped in tradition yet alive with vitality. The fulfilling journey has established a strange connection that may pull me back again.

GETTING THERE
Air India flies non-stop to Madurai from Chennai.

HOTELS TO CHECK

Heritage Madurai
Designed by Geoffrey Bawa, and nestled in 17 acres of gardens, it incorporates elements from local temple architecture. *heritagemadurai.com*

The Gateway Hotel Pasumalai, Madurai
This modern hotel has great views of the temple. Plus, the 62-acre estate has a Nature Trail. *tajhotels.com*

Courtyard by Marriott Madurai
A short distance from local attractions, this five-star hotel offers richly-decorated rooms and elegant dining options. *marriott.com*