

ULTRATRAVEL

OUT OF THIS WORLD

SUPPLEMENT OF THE YEAR

YOUR GUIDE TO THE SUMMER SEASON

How to do posh in style

THE REAL AMAN JUNKIE

He liked the hotels so much,
he bought the company

INSIDE INDOCHINA

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HIS 'N' HERS

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The Telegraph MARCH 2019

INDIAN SIMMER

A dishevelled beauty, charming

Chennai has much to offer

the curious traveller – not least

one of India's great heritage hotels

By Steven KING

Elizabeth Taylor, who had form when it came to acquiring things, losing them, then reacquiring them – just ask Richard Burton – once lost *La Peregina*, an antique pearl of extreme beauty and historical significance, in the white shag-pile carpet of a Las Vegas hotel room. The joint was turned upside down but to no avail. Eventually the search was called off, the priceless knick-knack abandoned – only to be retrieved at the last minute from between the teeth of the actress's trusty lapdog.

Chennai seems to me something of an Elizabeth Taylor kind of town. A city that – architecturally speaking – is careless with its treasures, which it possesses in abundance yet which tend to get misplaced, sometimes permanently, among the unlovely clutter. The tiara is still there, just partially obscured by a disastrous hair extension. One of that pair of splendid heirloom earrings has gone missing. The precious emerald pendant has been loosely reset by a shaky-handed apprentice. In short, by all means do judge by appearances – just not too quickly. Chennai will reward your patience. Seek out the Chepauk Palace, the Ripon Building, the Southern Railway headquarters.

Chennai's charms have also been overshadowed by those of India's other great imperial-era cities, Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi. Yet Chennai was first among them. In 1639 Madras, as it was then known, gave Britain, for better or worse, its foothold on coastal India. The modern city's claim on any traveller's attention remains compelling.

I based myself at the Taj Connemara, one of the great heritage hotels of India, though something of a curiosity in its current form, having evolved from what was

in effect a barracks on a dirt road to a grandiose, balustraded statement of Victorian authority to the all but uncategorisable hybrid you see today, with its additional layers of sleek art deco and Geoffrey Bawa tropical modernism.

I had an amusing lunch there with a local historian and columnist, Sriram Venkatakrishnan, one of those marvellous old-school newspapermen who always seem to have argument-clinching facts at their fingertips.

He directed my attention to the importance of the hotel, not only to the British administrators but also to the Indian film industry, which flourished in this part of the city in the first half of the 20th century and is still a vital part of its cultural and economic life. 'Did you know,' he asked, 'that Chennai produces more films per annum than Mumbai?' I had no idea. Nor that the most beautiful of Indian film stars, Madhubala, had lived upstairs. 'She was contracted by Gemini Studios to act in the film *Bahut Din Huve*, which means *Many Days Ago*, in 1954. She was put up at the Connemara by SS Vasan, the boss of Gemini. During the shoot, Madhubala fell ill and she had to stay at the Connemara for an extended period of time.' I took it as read that the studio boss's interest in his gorgeous starlet was not purely professional – which made the fact that his wife would send her home-cooked meals the more poignant. 'The film,' Venkatakrishnan added, 'though not bad, bombed at the box office.'

There was, I now realise, a good deal of Chennai in that last remark of his. It is a city of connoisseurs. Politely enquire of a local how, for example, the bones of St Thomas came to be housed in a basilica in ►

ESCAPE FROM IT ALL

This page, clockwise from left: one of Taj Connemara's Colonial rooms, which combine contemporary design features with old-world style; the poolside restaurant; enjoy breakfast in your room





SNAPSHOTS OF A CITY
Clockwise from top:
relax in style by Taj
Connemara's pool;
Chennai central station;
intricate carvings on the
seventh- and eighth-
century monuments of
Mahabalipuram; Indian
film star Madhubala with
co-star Dilip Kumar; the
Government Museum
in Chennai



ESSENTIALS

Ampersand Travel (020-7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) offers seven nights in South India, including three nights at Taj Connemara, Chennai, and four nights at Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andaman Islands, from £2,745 per person, including accommodation on a bed-and-breakfast basis, international and domestic flights, private transfers and privately guided sightseeing in Chennai and the Andamans. **British Airways** (0344-493 0787; britishairways.com) flies direct from London to Chennai daily.

Chennai, or why the Madonna there appears to be wearing a sari, and you will get chapter and verse – real information, delivered with pride and a point of view. Don't begin a conversation on the subject of cricket – this is, after all, the home of 'the other MCC', the Madras Cricket Club – unless you have a lot of time to spare.

I had the good fortune to spend a day with Anil Srinivasan, a leading figure in the city's music scene. He had promised to take me to the Kalakshetra Foundation and the Madras Music Academy, the two preeminent institutions for Carnatic music not only in the city but in the world. What he had not mentioned in advance was that the time we spent in transit would be as instructive as the time we would spend in those places. He had cunningly planted a couple of hitch-hikers along the route. The first literally sang me through the principles of *raga*, the intensely nuanced basis of southern Indian classical music. The second was a percussionist, a virtuoso of the tambourine-like *kanjira* and the two-ended mridangam drum. I cannot recall a more pleasurable car journey.

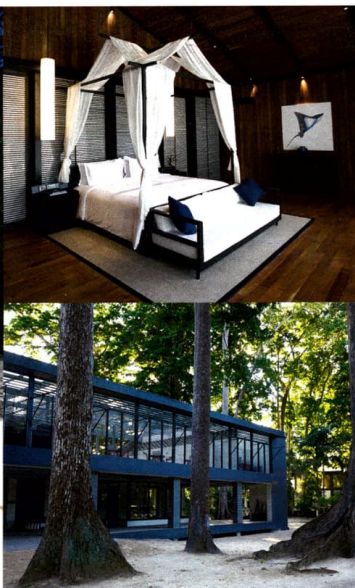
Having said that, I now look back on the brief while that we spent out of the car, wandering the inconceivably leafy, tranquil grounds of Kalakshetra, as among the happiest and most memorable moments of all the time I have spent in India. It was like being set serenely adrift on an ocean of music. Dancers and musicians performing inside and out, in the shade of giant banyan trees. It was more than merely civilised. It was, in its way, transcendent. I was reminded of a segment in Louis Malle's 1969 documentary *Phantom India*, in which the great French auteur, awestruck, narrates over fly-on-the-wall footage of two gifted young Carnatic dancers

rehearsing: 'There was something uncertain and unreal in the air that tore at one's heart. This grace, this beauty, this perfect harmony of body and mind is like the idealised vision of India, one that I'd so rarely encountered that I questioned whether it really existed.'

Chennai is also the gateway to the Coromandel Coast, its many temples, beaches and islands. These jewels, at least, are flaunted proudly, as they should be. Just an hour or so down the IT corridor that runs south out of Chennai – a sort of steel-and-glass netherland – are cosy resorts, surf schools and the ancient Tamil monuments of Mahabalipuram, with their balletic deities and life-sized elephants rampaging in stone.

A more significant skip in a light aircraft will get you to the Andaman Islands, at India's easternmost extremity. The Andamans have been in the news lately, of course – first, an American missionary's misadventure among the tribal people of Sentinel Island, then Prime Minister Modi's visit, during which he proposed renaming those of the islands that have British names with more patriotically Indian ones.

Such disruptions seemed oddly remote to me, though geographically speaking I could hardly have been closer to them. I was staying at the spectacular new Taj Exotica Resort & Spa. My thoughts took less troubled paths among its lush gardens, its dense mangroves, along its pristine beach and over its teeming reef. Yet we're contrary creatures, aren't we? Amid all those conspicuous splendours, I found myself thinking, too, of jewels less easy to find. I looked forward to getting back to Chennai and having another rummage under the city's frayed sofa cushions for more of its mislaid treasures. ●



'Chennai is the gateway to the Coromandel Coast, its temples, beaches and islands'

SHORE LEAVE

Clockwise from far left: Radhanagar Beach on Havelock Island in the Andaman Islands; colonial style in a suite at the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa; the hotel, while contemporary in design, remains in tune with nature – it was built without cutting down a single tree