

TheNational

Think **sport**



Pondicherry is flavoured by France

Last Updated: December 04, 2009 2:33PM UAE / December 4, 2009 10:33AM GMT



The Le Dupleix hotel is housed in a restored French colonial villa that used to be the residence of the mayor of Pondicherry. Hemant Chawla / The India Today Group / Getty

You can still get croissants and French-pressed coffee for breakfast in Pondicherry, but the tiny enclave on India's east coast is now better known for the Auroville community founded on the ideal of universal brotherhood. *Shoba Narayan* pays a visit

It is late at night when I reach Pondicherry, the seaside township three hours south of Chennai on the Coramandel coast. I drive through the quiet French Quarter bearing names such as Rue Suffren and Rue de la Marine, trying to find Le Dupleix, the boutique hotel where I am to stay. Hopelessly lost, I turn into a side street and confront a magical sight. Rows and rows of flickering earthen lamps light up an entire street. Colourful rangoli designs are drawn in front of every doorway, in exuberant preparation for the Karthigai Deepam festival.

Deepavali is over and preparations for Christmas and New Year have just begun. Costume parades are common, reflecting the French influence, and bands playing the accordion and trumpets march down the streets. A bustling Sunday market sells paper lanterns, embroidered skirts, silk cushions and cloth bags at bargain prices.

Hotel rates are high of course, but the gaiety in the air more than makes up for this. I have driven down to Pondicherry for the same reason countless urban Indians do: to experience its European élan and to stock up on holiday gifts from Auroville.

Le Dupleix, where I spend my first night, is a boutique hotel owned by Dilip Kapur, who founded the Hidesign brand of handbags which retail all over world (including in Dubai). Kapur and his German wife Jacqueline live in Auroville and their daughter, Ayesha is a Bollywood actress. Named after the 18th century French governor Joseph-Francois Dupleix, this restored French colonial villa used to be the home of the mayor of Pondicherry. It is walking distance from the French Institute, and thanks to the urging from my Francophile father, I duck into its Romain Rolland library to check out some rare French books. Pondicherry's centuries-old churches are a good way to escape the midday heat, and one of them, Our Lady of Angels, preserves an oil painting given by Napoleon III. The local museum is a pretty sorry affair but gives some idea about Pondicherry's chequered history.

Used as a trading port by the Dutch and the Danes, colonised by the French and the British, this "Riviera of the East" is now an Indian Union Territory, albeit with a strong European flavour. French remains an official language and Bastille Day is still celebrated. Bakeries sell flaky croissants and French-pressed coffee. Europeans drive around on Vespas and throng into the Aurobindo Ashram downtown.

For such a tiny place, Pondicherry occupies an outsized space in the Indian and global imagination. Christian Dior recently named a perfume after it; Yann Martel's Booker-winning novel *The Life of Pi* began in Pondicherry; wealthy Chennai socialites drive down for dinner to Pondicherry's French restaurants before heading back, like Cinderella,



before midnight; and countless Europeans make a pilgrimage here to get their dose of ashram chic. Many of them, like Luisa Meneghetti, the proprietor of Auroville Papers, never leave.

Walking into Auroville Papers is like entering a technicolour children's movie. Paper flowers in lurid orange, candy pink, lemon yellow and neon green dry in the sun. Stunning paper urns in burnt umber and vivid lavender arch precariously over stone bases. Handmade paper sheets flutter languidly on clotheslines. Papier mâché cups in pastel hues sit like children waiting for marbles. Then Luisa Meneghetti appears. Wearing grey yoga pants, a sleeveless top, platinum hair and welcoming smile, this slim Italian beauty looks effortlessly chic; and fits right into the tropical charm of Pondicherry.

Meneghetti has been a resident of Auroville, a sprawling "universal township" just outside Pondicherry, for over a decade. She greets me in her white contemporary office that could just as easily have been transposed to Paris. With her is Shandra Cornec, 27, who grew up in Auroville, and Herve Millet, a tall bearded German who understands Tamil, the local language, and banters with his Indian employees with a professorial twinkle. Millet walks me through their workshop where cotton rags and vegetal fibres are shredded to make papier mâché. Not a single tree is felled for their paper, he informs me. Between them, these three people epitomise Auroville.

Founded in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, now called Mother by her followers, Auroville is a utopian "universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony", according to its mission statement. Today, some 2,000 people from 30 countries live and work here, mostly attracted by the spiritual teachings of Mother and her guru, Sri Aurobindo, a Cambridge-educated Indian freedom fighter and saint. Together, Aurobindo and Paris-born Alfassa (who improbably had an Egyptian mother and Turkish father) put Pondicherry on the global map. "I came to India because of Mother," says Meneghetti simply, echoing most Aurovillians. "I came in search of the spiritual."

It would be easy to dismiss Auroville as a new-age cult built on legerdemain and holy basil tea were it not for the mind-boggling array of arts and crafts that it has spawned; a phenomenon that is more Santa Fe than South India. Global Indians like me buy these high-quality Auroville products – incense, candles, essential oils, soap, paper, clothes, art, pottery and paintings – to use and gift. But as Meneghetti points out, the profits don't benefit the proprietors of each enterprise. "Nothing here belongs to anybody," she says. "That is the first charter of Auroville." Instead, a third of the profits goes to the Auroville Trust, which gives each resident enough money for their "maintenance", and the remainder is funnelled back to grow each enterprise. "Auroville takes care of all our medical expenses, education and every other conceivable thing," says Cornec, who grew up studying at Auroville School. "It is a safety net for the people who live and work here."

While spirituality and idealism binds Aurovillians, their gift to India is that they have turned a once-barren land into a lush green forest. Spread over 800 hectares, Auroville's dirt roads and profusion of trees offer cool respite from the tropical heat. At its heart is a giant gold dome called Matri Mandir which is used as a meditation space, according to Vinodhini, a statuesque woman with jasmine strings in her hair, who works in Auroville's press outreach office. Vinodhini, who has lived here with her soapmaker husband for a decade, puts me in touch with the printers, potters and cheesemakers. When I tell her that she is lucky to be living in such a serene environment, she laughs. "No matter how pretty the outside is, you have to find your peace within," she responds. People in Auroville talk like this.

At the Auroville Visitors Centre's al fresco cafeteria, I lunch on – what else – Indian flatbreads and crème brûlée before going to the Dune, where I spend my second night.

The Dune is one of the few pet-friendly resorts near Bangalore and my pet Labrador, Inji, is the reason I am staying there. It turns out that Dune is owned by an ex-Aurovillian named Dmitri Klein, who lives on the property with his wife and three children. Klein was an advertising professional in France before "landing" in Pondicherry, as he says. The Dune showcases his passion for restoring antiques. All the villas, with names like Bangle House, Kerala House, Granite House and Courtyard House, are built from recycled wood, usually from old homes that were torn down. "All over South India, the construction trade knows about this mad Frenchman who pays good money for old doors, windows and even a chariot," laughs Sunil Verghese, Dune's director.

With their blue floors, glass encrusted tiles and kitschy Bollywood wallpaper, Dune's villas are anything but cookie-cutter. Many have been designed by artists invited to the property. Dune bills itself as an eco-resort but thankfully doesn't sacrifice air conditioning, a spacious bath or fragrant toiletries to save the planet.

One negative is that the resort is 20 kilometres outside Pondicherry, so that going into town becomes a logistical exercise, particularly when all we want to do is bathe in the ocean, sunbathe and snooze during the midday heat. We end

If you go

The flight
Return flights from
Abu Dhabi to
Chennai on Etihad
Airways
(www.etihadairways.com)
cost from US\$470
(Dh1,725)
including taxes

The stay
Deluxe suites at Le
Dupleix
(www.sarovarhotels.com)
and double rooms
at the Dune hotel
(www.thedunehotel.com)
both cost from
\$118 (Dh435) per
night, including
taxes and
breakfast

up going into Pondicherry for dinner, trying out French fare at Satsanga one night; Indian dosas at Krishna Sweets on another; and the seafood platter at Rendezvous with friends. After dinner, we stroll along the beachfront, dodging snuggling couples, cavorting children and senior citizens munching on peanuts. The air is balmy and stars blanket the night sky.

I spend my last morning at the Aurobindo Ashram, a serene hub of activity in the midst of the French Quarter. There are guided tours, a library, books and incense for sale, and the “samadhi” where Sri Aurobindo and Mother’s bodies were laid to rest. I join a quiet group sitting in collective meditation around the flower-covered samadhi. French perfume mixes with jasmine and incense. In their mingling lies the magic of this seaside town.

travel@thenational.ae

Have your say

Please [log in](#) to post a comment
