CHENNAI

a map made by Zostel for young travellers

FREE MAP · TAMIL NADU



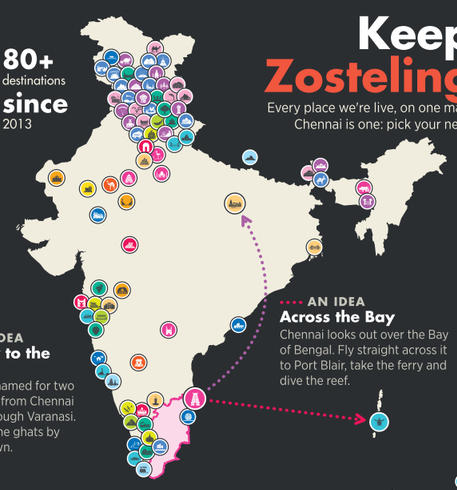
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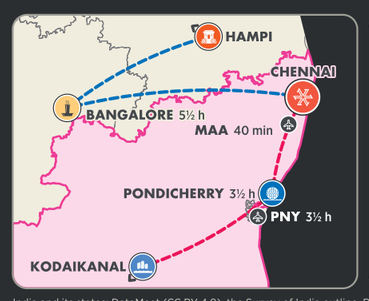
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Every place we're live, on one map. Chennai is one: pick your next.



AN IDEA
The Bay to the Ganga
One train, named for two rivers, runs from Chennai Central through Varanasi. Drift past the ghats by boat at dawn.

AN IDEA
Across the Bay
Chennai looks out over the Bay of Bengal. Fly straight across it to Port Blair, take the ferry and dive the reef.



Around Chennai, by road

Drive times from our Zostel in Chennai

Down the coast, up the hills
Pondicherry 3½ h › Kodaikanal 9½ h
Pondicherry's French lanes, then Kodaikanal's mist.

West to the boulders
Bangalore 5½ h › Hampi 6½ h
Bangalore's filter coffee, then Hampi's boulders.

MAA 40 min, PNY 3½ h
Chennai Central 8 km

India and its states: DataMeet (CC BY 4.0), the Survey of India outline. Roads, airports, station: © OpenStreetMap contributors; drive times by FOSSGIS OSRM, scaled to Zostel's own published times (2026-10). Pins nudged apart where they crowd; edge pins point the way. Flights and trains change: check before you plan.

Mylapore to the Marina: the temple, the tank, the basilica and the sea

7.7 km · about 4.5 hours with stops · 9 stops

From Luz Church into Mylapore: the gopuram, the Mada streets' kolams and a kaapi, the great tank. East to Santhome's basilica and the Loop Road's fishing villages, north past the lighthouse onto the Marina, to the Ice House.



◀ **Zostel Chennai (Anna Nagar) · 7.1 km**
Anna Nagar East metro, then a 200 m walk; an auto from Koyambedu bus stand.

Snack: Sundal from the sellers on the sand

Marina Beach

Vanakkam, Chennai!

Vanakkam! We're the Chennai Zobus, and this was Madras until 1996. The city began in 1639 as a strip of sand by a fishing village and grew round the first English fort in India. Mylapore is older still: walk round its temple tank under the gopuram at dawn, step round the morning's kolams and take your filter kaapi in a steel tumbler. Then walk to the sea. The Marina is one of the longest city beaches in the world, made for kites, sundal and sunrise, never for swimming. In December the whole city goes to concerts; on a big film's first day, it queues before sunrise. Seri, machan: stay longer.

Stay with us in Chennai

One Zostel in Anna Nagar, Kollywood on its walls and the metro a short walk away.

Zostel Chennai (Anna Nagar)

Kollywood art on the walls, a common room for game nights, cosy corners to work from. Dorms only. In Anna Nagar, 200 m from Anna Nagar East metro and ten minutes' walk from Tower Park; the metro runs here from Egmore and the airport.

Maps: © OpenStreetMap contributors (ODbL), data fetched 2026-10-13 (UTC) · Terrain: Terrain Tiles on AWS (Mapzen/Tilezen), from SRTM courtesy of NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey. Walk lines routed by FOSSGIS OSRM on OpenStreetMap. Drawings: the Zostel brand's own. Things change: check the day's timings at the gate.

Practical tips

Getting in

Flights land at Chennai International Airport; trains at Central and Egmore; buses at Koyambedu. From each, the metro runs to Anna Nagar East, and our home is a 200 m walk from that station.

The metro

Air-conditioned and the quickest way across town: the Blue Line from the airport up Anna Salai and north past Central, the Green Line from Central out through Anna Nagar and Koyambedu. New lines are opening a stretch at a time.

The MRTS and the suburban trains

The MRTS, India's first elevated railway, runs from Chennai Beach along the coast through Chepauk, Thiruvallikeni and Thirumayilai: the old heart by train. Suburban lines fan out from Central, Beach and Egmore.

Buses and autos

MTC buses are government-run and cheap. Every auto has a meter, but many don't work: agree the fare first, or book one on an app. The traffic in the centre is slow, so leave time.

The Marina is not for swimming

Bathing and swimming at the Marina are against the law: the undercurrent is strong and there are no lifeguards, and it still has more drownings than any other place in the state. Walk it, fly a kite, eat sundal; keep out of the water, and off the sand late at night.

Heat, then rain

April to June is hot and sticky: go out early, carry water, rest in the afternoon. Most of the year's rain comes with the north-east monsoon, October to December, with cyclones and floods in low-lying streets. December to February is the kindest.

Temples, churches, mosques

Shoes off at temple and mosque gates, shoulders and knees covered, and ask before you photograph people. Churches want quiet and modest clothes too.

Money, and staying safe

UPI works almost everywhere; small stalls want cash, and our home takes cards and UPI. Watch your pockets in crowds, at Parry's Corner and on the Marina. Our home has a dorm for women only.

Every number is a tip on the map overleaf, in the colour of its kind: Gopurams to Gothic · The Coast and the Banyans · Tiffin, Meals, Biryani · Silk and Sowcarpet · Sabhas and Kollywood · For a True Machan. A drawing beside a line shows what you will find there:

The stops

11 Luz Church (Our Lady of Light)
Look for the Gothic arches and the Baroque ornament on its front

1 Kapaleeshwarar Temple
Look for the painted stucco figures crowding the tall east gopuram

5 The Mada streets, Mylapore
Look for a fresh white kolam on a washed doorstep, and jasmine being strung

4 The Kapaleeshwarar tank
Look for the small 16-pillared granite mandapam standing in the middle of the water

9 Santhome Basilica
Look for the second, small spire in the middle that marks the tomb

7 The Loop Road's fishing villages
Look for nets being mended on the sand as the boats come in

6 Chennai Lighthouse
Look for the banded tower, and the lift to the ninth-floor gallery

19 Marina Beach
Look for sundal sellers and kite flyers on the sand

17 Vivekananda House (the Ice House)
Look for the round front built to store ice shipped from America

5 minutes of history

600s
The Pallavas by the shore
The Pallavas of Kanchi rule the coast. A first Kapaleeshwarar temple is held to have stood by the sea at Mylapore, and a Pallava king builds the Parthasarathy temple in Triplicane.

1523
The apostle's church
Portuguese priests build a church over the tomb held to be St Thomas the Apostle's, and the shore becomes Santhome. Today's neo-Gothic basilica rises on the spot in the 1890s.

1639
A strip of sand
On 22 August the East India Company is granted a strip of coast about 10 km long and 1.6 km deep, round the fishing village of Madraspatnam. The city keeps the date as Madras Day.

1644
The first English fort
Begun in 1640, Fort St George is finished on St George's Day, 23 April 1644: the first English fortress in India. It still holds Tamil Nadu's assembly.

1688
A city council, still sitting
The Corporation of Madras is set up on 29 September 1688. Now the Greater Chennai Corporation, it is the oldest surviving municipal corporation in India.

1801
Capital of the south
With the Carnatic Treaty the Company rules most of South India from Madras, capital of the Madras Presidency. Later, Ooty, now a Zostel place in the Nilgiris, becomes its summer capital.

1884
The Marina gets its promenade
The harbour, built from 1881, lets sand pile up on the shore, and Governor Grant Duff lays out a promenade along it: the Marina.

1911
Black Town becomes George Town
The crowded town the British called Black Town, outside the fort's walls, is renamed George Town for King George V's coronation.

1927
The December season
A music conference in Madras gives birth to the Music Academy and a festival of Carnatic music each December. The season now fills dozens of halls and sabhas.

1996
Madras becomes Chennai
On 17 July the state renames the city Chennai, after Chennappa Nayaka, the Vijayanagara general of the 1639 grant. Many still call it Madras.

2004
The wave
On 26 December the Indian Ocean tsunami strikes Chennai's coast, killing 206 people in the city and changing its shoreline.

2015
The metro opens
On 29 June Chennai's first metro trains run, between Alandur and Koyambedu. The lines now reach the airport, Central and Anna Nagar, and more are being built.

Talk like a local

Vanakkam
Hello, with palms together
vuh-nnuhk-kuhm

Nandri
Thank you
nuhn-drih

Seri
Okay, fine, done
seh-ree

Machan
Mate, best friend (also a brother-in-law)
mutch-chaan

Evlavu?
How much?
ev-luh-voo

Thanni
Water: ask for it often
thun-nee

Sema
Superb, the Madras Bashai way
seh-muh

Gethu
Swagger, style
geh-thu

Galatta
Commotion, a fun mess
guh-lut-taa

Dabbu
Money, in Madras Bashai
dub-bu

Eat like you're from Madras

Chennai eats in tiffins. Mornings are idli under sambar and a filter kaapi in Mylapore and Triplicane; lunch is a meal on a banana leaf; evenings are bajji and sundal by the sea. George Town adds North Indian chaat on Mint Street and Burmese atho at Parry's; Royapettah adds Chettinad. The old counters first, then the dishes to hunt down.

Ratna Cafe. Never-ending sambar, ladled over idli from small buckets until it floats.
"One more ladle of sambar? Seri. And one more."

Rayar's Mess. Vegetarian meals on a banana leaf; mornings are idli, vadai and pongal.
"Same lane, same menu, same queue. That's the point."

2 Mylai Karpagambal Mess. The ending: badam halwa and a filter coffee.
"Temple first, tiffin next, halwa last. Mylapore's order."

Kalathi Rose Milk Stall. Chennai's classic for the heat: a bottle of rose milk, sipped on the street.
"Cold, pink, sweet. Drink it standing."

3 Jannal Bajji Kadai. Hot bajjis handed out of a window, and idli and upma in the morning.
"No door, no table. Just the window and the bajji."

30 Kakada Ramprasad. Sowcarpet's chaat house: aloo tikki chaat and jalebi hot from the pan.
"Mint Street eats North Indian, and it eats it hot."

30 Novelty Tea House. Credited with bringing pav bhaji to Chennai; the pudhina onion dosa is its own.
"Pav bhaji, on a Chennai street, since the fifties."

The atho stalls. Cold noodles tossed by hand, with plantain-stem soup poured in halfway.
"A few spoons dry, then pour in the soup."

Buhari. Where the city says Chicken 65 was born; why 65, nobody can prove.
"Ask why it's called 65. Get three answers."

Anjappar and Ponnusamy. Chettinad cooking: fresh-ground spice, star anise, pepper and kalpasi, with meat and sea fish.
"Pepper first, then everything else. Keep the water close."

Velu Military Hotel. The old military-hotel menu: country chicken biryani, kola urundai and crab masala.
"Military means meat. Order the biryani."

Grand Fast Food. Kothu parotta the street way: parotta chopped on a hot griddle with egg, onion and chilli.
"Listen for the blades. That's dinner."

Grand Sweets and Snacks. The stock-up stop for crunchy murukku and seedai.
"Buy one box for the train. Buy one for home."

Murugan Idli Shop. Fluffy idlis with sambar and a rainbow of chutneys.
"Count the chutneys. Then try every one."

Annalakshmi, Saravana Bhavan and Hot Chips. Annalakshmi's temple-style vegetarian meals, Saravana Bhavan's sambar vadai, Hot Chips' evening snacks.
"Vada in sambar, meals on a leaf, chips for the road."

Dishes to hunt down

2 Filter kaapi. Chennai's drink: dark-roasted coffee with a little chicory, brewed in a two-part steel filter, mixed with hot milk and poured between tumbler and davara to cool it and raise the froth.

Sambar idli. Steamed rice cakes drowned in sambar; Ratna Cafe's waiters keep the ladle going.

Dosa. The crisp fermented crepe, ghee roast at Ratna, podi or spinach in the messes.

Banana-leaf meals. Rice with sambar, poriyal, chutneys and appalam laid on a leaf; Mylapore's messes still serve it so.

18 Sundal. Boiled chickpeas or peas tempered with mustard seed and curry leaves, with grated coconut: the Marina's morning snack.

3 Bajji. Chilli or raw banana dipped in batter and fried, eaten with chutney, from a temple window or a beach stall.

Murukku and seedai. Crunchy fried rice-flour spirals and balls, the snacks to carry home.

Chettinad. The Nagarathar community's cooking from round Karaikudi: fresh-ground spice, star anise, fennel, pepper and kalpasi with goat, chicken and sea fish.

Biryani. Military-hotel biryani of country chicken, and Ambur-style biryani on seeraga samba rice with brinjal curry and raita.

Atho. Burma's noodle salad, brought by Tamil families who came back in the 1960s and changed for Chennai.

Chicken 65. Red, spicy fried chicken, credited to Buhari's on Mount Road; the name's story is still argued.

Filter kaapi, the Chennai way

The filter. Two stacked steel cups: fine coffee in the top one, pressed with a disc, boiling water poured over, the brew dripping slowly into the cup below.

The blend. Dark-roasted beans with a little chicory, one part in ten to one in five, for the bitter edge.

Milk and sugar. The brew is mixed with hot milk, and sugar if you like.

Tumbler and davara. Served in a steel tumbler set in a wide steel bowl; pour it from one to the other to cool it and raise the froth.

2 Where to drink it. After a tiffin in the old messes: Karpagambal's degree coffee, Rayar's, Ratna Cafe.

Kumbakonam degree coffee. The town that gave the strong, frothy kind its name.

Got a day to spare?

43 Mahabalipuram. About 60 km south, the Pallavas' carved seaside: the Shore Temple and one of the largest open-air rock reliefs in the world. A World Heritage Site since 1984.

43 DakshinaChitra. About 25 km down the East Coast Road, real old houses from across the south, moved here and rebuilt, with craftspeople at work.

43 Kovalam (Covelong). About 40 km south, a fishing village with surf schools: take a first lesson on its waves.

Pulicat. About 60 km north, India's second-largest brackish lagoon: flamingos by the thousand in season, and a Dutch fort and cemetery.

44 Kanchipuram. About 70 km south-west, the Pallavas' capital and the city of a thousand temples, where the silk sold in T Nagar is woven.

On to Pondicherry. From Chennai, Pondicherry is about 155 km down the coast road, past Mahabalipuram: Zostel Pondicherry (Auroville Road) is there.

5 The Mylapore Festival. Every January, the streets round the Kapaleeshwarar temple become a festival: kolam contests, music and dance on street stages, heritage walks and food stalls.

33 Madras Day. The city's birthday, 22 August, has grown into a month of heritage walks, talks, quizzes and photo walks across town.

The Chennai Book Fair. One of India's biggest book fairs, held since 1977, now each January on the YMCA grounds at Nandanam.

Madras Bashai: Chennai's own Tamil

Three centuries of borrowing. The city's street Tamil grew up with the port, taking words from English, Telugu, Hindustani and even Burmese.

Dubakoor. A fraud: from the dubash, the Company's middlemen, whose name went bad.

Osi. Free of charge: from the 'OC' stamped on the Company's letters in place of postage.

Naina. Father, from Telugu, one of the city's many languages.

Sung, not just spoken. Gaana, North Chennai's songs, are sung in Madras Bashai, and Tamil films have used it for laughs since the 1950s.

Kollywood

Kodambakkam's nickname. Tamil cinema is Kollywood after Kodambakkam, the Chennai neighbourhood full of film studios.

Talking since 1931. The first Tamil talkie, Kalidas, came out in 1931, months after India's first.

First day, first show. A big star's opening day starts before dawn outside the theatres, with drums and a crowd that knows every line.

Kollywood at home. Our home's walls are Kollywood posters and art: pick your hero.

Markets by what they sell

Madras checks. The handwoven cotton check named after the city: the same pattern on both sides, colours famous for bleeding in the wash.

5 Mylapore's Mada streets. Jasmine by the mozham on South Mada Street, kolam powders all Margazhi, kolu dolls at Navaratri.

40 Kanchipuram silk. The silk houses round Panagal Park, T Nagar; Nalli since 1928. Check the border's interlocked joint.

39 Ranganathan Street. Clothes, gold and everything down to safety pins, from Usman Road to Mambalam station.

23 Pondy Bazaar. Clothes, shoes and phones; on the wide pavements, used books, bangles and bags. Bargain.

35 Burma Bazaar. A kilometre of electronics and odd finds by Chennai Beach station. Doubt the brand names.

30 Sowcarpet's trade streets. Wholesale George Town, a street to each trade: textiles on Godown Street, steel vessels in Rattan Bazaar.

29 Old books. The Moore Market complex by Central, the city's biggest second-hand book market; a stall at Luz Corner.

26 Higginbothams. Mount Road's bookshop since 1844, in its own building since 1904.

The Chennai Book Fair. Every January: small stalls of lesser-known titles. Carry cash for the small stalls.

Festivals worth timing a trip for

The December Music Season. Since 1927, mid-December to mid-January: Carnatic concerts and dance in the Music Academy and dozens of sabhas, from afternoon into the night.

19 Pongal. The Tamil harvest festival, in mid-January: four days, pots of rice boiled over, kolams at every door, and on the last day, Kaanum Pongal, crowds on the Marina.

Chennai these days

The temples keep their hours. The city round them keeps changing.

The metro, growing. Since 2015 the metro has crept across the city, airport to Central to Anna Nagar, and new lines are opening a stretch at a time.

21 Besant Nagar's cafés. The south's evening hangout: cafés behind Elliot's Beach, a cycle along the shore, and the crowd on the sand.

Gaana gets a stage. North Chennai's own songs, sung in Madras Bashai, have gone from the streets to film soundtracks and bands of their own.

43 Surf on the east coast. Down the coast road, Kovalam's fishing village now teaches surfing to beginners.

Books every January. The Chennai Book Fair has run every January since 1977.

Good to know

When the surf glows blue. Some nights the waves on the southern beaches, Thiruvanmiyur, Palavakkam, Elliot's, light up blue: a bloom of the plankton Noctiluca, stirred by the surf. Beautiful and unpredictable, and often a sign of stressed water, so watch it from the sand.

How to eat on a banana leaf. In the messes, lunch comes on a banana leaf: sprinkle a little water on it, then eat with your right hand. Rice comes round more than once, the last time with curd. Done? Fold the leaf to thank the host.

Vada curry, Saidapet's breakfast. Saidapet's own dish: medu vadas crumbled into a spiced onion gravy, scooped up with dosa or idli. The story goes it began as a way to use up the day's spare vadas.

Golu dolls on North Mada Street. In the week before Navaratri, hawkers line North Mada Street in Mylapore with golu dolls: gods, weddings, village scenes. Homes set them out on an odd number of steps, and neighbours visit each other's displays in the evenings.

Karthigai Deepam. On the full moon of the Tamil month of Karthigai, in November or December, homes light clay lamps at their doors and the Kapaleeshwarar tank's steps are ringed with them. Mada Street hawkers sell the lamps by the heap.

Kasimedu's fish auction. North of the port, Kasimedu's fishing harbour wakes long before the city: boats come in through the night, and seer fish, crab, prawn and pomfret are auctioned and gone soon after sunrise. Loud and wet: wear old shoes, mind the porters.

Planes from St Thomas Mount. A small hill by the airport, climbed by 134 steps laid in 1726 by an Armenian merchant, with a shrine to Our Lady of Expectation on top. From the parapet, planes drop onto the runway and half the city spreads out.

Pallikaranai, the last great marsh. About 20 km south, Chennai's one surviving wetland, a Ramsar site since 2022. Spot-billed pelicans live here all year; in winter come pintails, shovelers, flamingos and waders. A 2 km trail and watch towers let you look.

Cholamandal, the artists' village. In Injambakkam, off the ECR, India's largest artists' commune, founded in 1966 by K. C. S. Paniker and students of the Madras School of Arts. Its museum tells the Madras Movement's story; the galleries sell straight from the artists.

Crocodiles on the ECR. Forty km down the East Coast Road, the Madras Crocodile Bank, founded in 1976 by Romulus Whitaker: fifteen kinds of crocodile, Komodo dragons, and venom shows by the Irula snake catchers' cooperative. An easy stop on the way to Mahabalipuram.

The healing god of Thiruvanmiyur. By the sea at Thiruvanmiyur, a Shiva temple sung in the 7th-century Tevaram hymns. Its name, Marundeeswarar, the lord of medicine, comes from the legend that here he taught the sage Agastya the healing herbs.

Semmozhi Poonga. Chennai's first botanical garden, opened in 2010 on Cathedral Road where the Woodlands Drive-In stood: about 20 acres, some 500 plant species, a butterfly garden and century-old trees. A shady hour between the traffic; check the closed day.

A long day at Vandalur. Arignar Anna Zoological Park began in 1855 as the Madras Zoo and moved to Vandalur's scrub forest in 1985: a lion safari and a walk-through aviary. Closed on Tuesdays; check the safari is running before you go.

Tamil first, then English. Tamil is what you hear on the street; English carries signs, menus and most conversations, Hindi much less, so try English first. Vanakkam for hello and nandri for thank you go a long way.

Women's coaches. Suburban trains carry a ladies' compartment, often the calmer one at rush hour. On the metro, a coach is set aside for women, and a women's patrol, the Pink Squad, rides the trains.

Triplicane to Chepauk: a temple, a mosque and the Nawabs' Madras

3.5 km · about 3 hours

Triplicane's Parthasarathy temple, its lanes of mansions and messes, the Big Mosque in grey granite (1795), the Nawabs' red Chepauk Palace, Chepauk's cricket ground and the Senate House facing the sea.

13 12 15 14 16

QUESTS

Dares for the brave and the curious. The map marks each with a star; tick them off as you go.

1 Count the tiers of the east gopuram. The tower over the east gate, nearly 40 m tall, rises in stepped tiers crowded with stucco figures. Stand across the street, count, and lose count.

4 Walk all four sides of the Mylapore tank. About 190 m by 143 m, with water all year. Go round it early, with the gopuram over your shoulder.

5 Spot the morning's first kolam on a doorstep. Rice-flour lines looped round a grid of dots, drawn fresh at dawn on the Mada streets. Look, and step round it.

1 Find the peacock in Mylapore's name. Mylapore is from 'mayil', the peacock: the land of the peacock's cry. Find the birds on the temple's towers.

9 Visit the basilica over an apostle's tomb. The Portuguese built a church here in 1523 over the tomb held to be St Thomas's; the white neo-Gothic basilica came in the 1890s. Dress modestly and keep quiet inside.

19 Watch the sun come up over the Bay. The Marina faces due east over the Bay of Bengal. Be on the sand at first light, with the morning walkers.

18 Eat hot sundal from a Marina cart. Chickpeas, sold warm by the morning vendors on the sand: a Marina classic.

19 Fly a kite on the Marina. The sea wind does the work. Buy a kite on the sand and join the strings over the beach.

6 Climb the lighthouse for the whole Marina. The lighthouse on the Marina is open to visitors: from the top, the beach runs out of sight both ways.

13 Find one of Chennai's oldest temples in Triplicane. A Pallava temple to Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer, in Triplicane, whose old name means a pond of lilies. Walk its streets of old mansions and messes after.

33 See the first English fort. Finished in 1644, still a working seat of government: carry ID. Its museum keeps the Company's relics.

34 Find the oldest British building in India. St Mary's, inside the fort, was consecrated in 1680 and is called the Westminster Abbey of the East. Clive was married here.

22 See the Adyar banyan on an open day. In the Theosophical Society's gardens, a banyan said to be 450 years old. The campus opens only on some days: check first.

20 Walk the beach at night for turtle nests. January to April, olive ridleys nest on these beaches. The Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network walks from Neelankarai to Besant Nagar on weekend nights to save the eggs: register ahead, keep torches off.

38 Look for blackbuck from Guindy's edge. One of the few national parks inside a city, beside Raj Bhavan: blackbuck and spotted deer. Ask at the gate about walks inside.

41 Watch the sunset at Anna Nagar Tower Park. A ten-minute walk from our home, the park with the 41 m tower is where Anna Nagar comes for the sunset.

Chennai

Every number is a tip around the map, in its colour. Every star is a quest.

One home in Anna Nagar: Zostel Chennai, Kollywood on the walls and the metro a short walk away.

Zostel Chennai (Anna Nagar) · 8.1 km
Anna Nagar East metro, then a 200 m walk; an auto from Koyambedu bus stand. ▶

From Pondicherry, straight up the coast road. The Marina at sunrise: sundal in hand, and never in the water.

Kodai has its hills. Mylapore has a gopuram of tiers stacked to the sky: I counted them twice.

Mysore has its pak. Mylapore has its old messes by the temple, and a filter kaapi to end every meal.

Bangalore to Besant Nagar on a Friday night: the beach, the food stalls, and the sea breeze for free.

Around Chennai

The box is the big map. Edge pins point the way (not to scale).

◀ Kanchipuram 65.3 km

◀ Mahabalipuram, down the East Coast Road 46.8 km

Gopurams to Gothic
The Coast and the Banyans
Tiffin, Meals, Biryani
Silk and Sowcarpet
Sabhas and Kollywood
For a True Machan
our Zostel
a quest (the list is round the map)
Mylapore to the Marina, the walk (side A)
circled: don't miss it
a dot: its true place, where a number stands aside
a drawing by a number: what is there
at the edge: beyond the map, its way and distance
landmarks
parks and gardens
grassland
a station
water
orchards
the railway
the metro
N
0 250 m 500 m

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REACHING US

Kollywood on the walls, metro at the corner
Zostel Chennai (Anna Nagar). Kollywood art on the walls, a common room for game nights, cosy corners to work from. Dorms only. In Anna Nagar, 200 m from Anna Nagar East metro and ten minutes' walk from Tower Park; the metro runs here from Egmore and the airport.

GOPURAMS TO GOTHIC

1 The gopuram that runs the street
Kapaleeshwarar Temple. Sung by Tamil poet-saints in the 7th century, rebuilt inland around the 17th; the tall east gopuram, crowded with painted figures, dates from 1906. Mylapore is named for the peacock. Footwear off, shoulders and knees covered, ask before photographing. Fridays are busiest.

4 A stepped tank with a hall afloat
The Kapaleeshwarar tank. About 190 m by 143 m, stepped on all four sides, a 16-pillared granite mandapam in the middle. The west gopuram faces it; the Mada streets run round. Sit on the steps at dusk. Take an auto to 'Mylapore Tank' and walk from there.

6 A lift to the top of the Marina
Chennai Lighthouse. Chennai's fourth lighthouse, opened in 1977: a lift to the ninth-floor gallery over the Marina and the bay, one of the few in the world with a lift. Earlier lights: the Fort Museum's roof, the High Court's dome. Check the day's timings.

9 Built over an apostle's tomb, by the sea
Santhome Basilica. The Portuguese built in 1523 over the tomb held to be Thomas the Apostle's; the white neo-Gothic church dates from 1896, with a 45 m spire. Teak vaulting, stained glass; the tomb chapel below has its own entrance. Dress modestly, keep voices down.

11 The church that named a neighbourhood
Luz Church (Our Lady of Light). Nossa Senhora da Luz: built by the Portuguese in 1516, one of the city's oldest churches, and the one the Luz corner is named after. Gothic arches, Baroque ornament. Its feast is 15 August. Dress modestly and keep quiet during services.

12 Granite, no iron, no wood, since 1795
The Big Mosque (Wallajah Mosque). Completed in 1795 by the Nawab of Arcot's family; still the city's largest mosque. Grey granite with no iron or wood, two minarets with golden finials, a courtyard and tank. Dress modestly, visit outside prayer times, ask at the gate first.

13 Triplicane's oldest address, by its lily pond
Parthasarathy Temple, Triplicane. One of the city's oldest temples, first built by the Pallavas, with inscriptions from the 8th century. Thiruvallikeni means 'the sacred lily pond': the tank in front. Around it, Triplicane's lanes, old mansions and banana-leaf messes. Footwear off, dress modestly.

15 Where Indo-Saracenic started, in red brick
Chepauk Palace. The Nawab of Arcot's palace, finished in 1768: among the first Indo-Saracenic buildings in India, red brick and wide arches. The Nawabs lived here until 1855. Government offices now, so admire it from Wallajah Road and the beach side.

16 The Marina's grand front row
Senate House and Presidency College. A row of Madras's proudest buildings facing the sea: Chisholm's Indo-Saracenic Senate House (1874-79), where the Music Season's first annual conference met in 1929, and Presidency College, founded in 1840. Working campuses: admire from the promenade.

17 An ice house, then a saint's house
Vivekananda House (the Ice House). Built in 1842 by the American 'ice king' Frederic Tudor to store ice shipped from America. Swami Vivekananda stayed nine days here in 1897; the Ramakrishna Math now keeps an exhibition on his life. Right across from the Marina.

24 A stone temple car that never moves
Valluvar Kottam. A 39 m stone chariot, a copy of Thiruvarur's temple car in some 3,000 granite blocks, for the poet of the Thirukkural; all 1,330 couplets are carved beside it. Opened 1976, renovated, with a library and light shows. Come late afternoon.

25 Named for a thousand lamps
Thousand Lights Mosque. The many-domed Shia mosque on Anna Salai that named the neighbourhood: built in 1810 by the Nawab of Arcot where a hall was once lit by a thousand oil lamps. Dress modestly, visit outside prayer times, ask at the gate.

27 The white wedding cake by Central
Ripon Building. Seat of the city corporation since 1913: all white, Ionic and Corinthian columns, and a 43 m tower whose Westminster-chime clock is still wound every day. Red-brick Victoria Public Hall stands next door. An office: look from the road.

32 Red domes, a lighthouse and a shell mark
Madras High Court. Red Indo-Saracenic domes from 1892; one was the city's third lighthouse, and the granite column of the second stands in the grounds. A plaque marks where the German cruiser Emden's shell struck in 1914. A working court: admire from outside.

33 Where Madras began, in 1639
Fort St George and the Fort Museum. Granted in 1639, finished on St George's Day 1644: the first English fortress in India, and the start of Madras. It holds the Assembly now, so carry ID. See the Fort Museum (check the day's timings at the gate) and St Mary's Church.

34 Britain's oldest building in India
St Mary's Church, in the fort. Consecrated in 1680: the oldest British building in India, built for a siege with thick walls and a bomb-proof roof. Elihu Yale married here in 1680, Robert Clive in 1753. A working church inside the fort: dress modestly.

36 Eight shrines, climbed by stairs, by the sea
Ashtalakshmi Temple. Consecrated in 1976 on the shore at the end of Elliot's Beach: eight shrines to Lakshmi stacked on four levels, climbed by stairs with the sea beside you. Footwear off, dress modestly; go early or on a weekday.

42 India's second-oldest museum, a whole campus
Government Museum, Egmore. Founded in 1851: the second-oldest museum in India, with one of the biggest hoards of Roman coins outside Europe. The National Art Gallery, Museum Theatre and Connemara Library share the campus. Check the day's timings; give it a morning.

THE COAST AND THE BANYANS

7 The Marina's other half: the fishers' shore
The Loop Road's fishing villages. South of the lighthouse, the 2.5 km Loop Road runs past the fishing villages, Nochikuppam among them. Boats come in at dawn, nets are mended on the sand. 'Catamaran' comes from the Tamil kattumaram. It's home and work: ask before photographing.

10 Birds, mangroves and a bridge to nowhere
The Adyar estuary: the Poonga and the Broken Bridge. The Adyar's estuary, a protected reserve since 1987: the Tholkappia Poonga restores its wetland, and flamingos sometimes visit the creek. At the mouth, the Broken Bridge, built in 1967 and cut by a 1977 flood: a sunset spot. Never swim here.

19 Huge, sandy, and not for swimming
Marina Beach. One of the world's longest urban beaches: named the Madras Marina in 1884. Sundal at sunrise, kites and cricket at dusk. Never swim: it's prohibited, the undercurrent is strong and people drown here every year.

20 Bessie: the beach the city's young own
Elliot's Beach (Besant Nagar). 'Bessie': quieter than the Marina by day, Besant Nagar's evening hangout of cafés and street food. The Kaj Schmidt Memorial remembers a sailor who drowned saving a girl: don't swim. Velankanni church and Ashtalakshmi at the south end. Cycle the shore road.

22 A 450-year-old banyan, behind a closed gate
The Theosophical Society and its banyan. The Theosophical Society's 260-acre garden on the Adyar since 1882, with a banyan said to be 450 years old, its roots across 60,000 square metres. The campus is usually closed to visitors (the bookshop by the gate is open): check ts-adyar.org for open days.

38 Blackbuck in the middle of the city
Guindy National Park. One of India's smallest national parks, inside the city: 2.7 sq km of forest with some 400 blackbuck and 2,000 spotted deer. Visitors see the Children's Park and the snake park at its edge. Check the day's timings at the gate.

41 Our park, with a tower to climb
Anna Nagar Tower Park. Ten minutes' walk from the Zostel: Anna Nagar's 15-acre park, with a 41 m tower from 1968, open again, with safety grilles. Climb its twelve storeys at sunset for the city's rooftops. Check the tower's hours at the gate.

43 The Pallavas' stone seaside, a day south
Mahabalipuram, down the East Coast Road. About an hour and a half down the East Coast Road: the Pallavas' 7th- and 8th-century monuments, a UNESCO site, with the Shore Temple and the five rathas. Stop on the way at DakshinaChitra's crafts and Covelong's surf. Leave early.

44 A thousand temples, and the silk
Kanchipuram. About two hours south-west: the Pallavas' capital, the City of a Thousand Temples, with the Kailasanathar among its oldest. Home of Kanchipuram silk: a sari takes weeks on the loom. Buy from a shop you chose yourself.

TIFFIN, MEALS, BIRYANI

2 Kaapi and halwa by the temple tank
Mylai Karpagambal Mess, East Mada Street. On East Mada Street by the temple, a stand-and-eat counter from the early 1950s grown into a big hall. End on badam halwa and filter coffee. Before that, adai with avial or keerai vadai. Take a packet of halwa from the counter.

3 Mylapore's snack comes out of a window
Jannal Bajji Kadai, Mylapore. The window shop: a small grilled window in a wall by the temple, decades old. Through the grille come hot chilli and raw-banana bajjis, and idli and upma in the morning. No seats, no real sign: find the crowd eating off paper on the street.

8 The catch, sold beside the traffic
The fish market on the Loop Road, Nochikuppam. South of the Lighthouse, the Loop Road runs past seven fishing villages, Nochikuppam the biggest. Sellers crouch by the road with buckets of the day's catch, nets stacked, boats on the sand behind. Go in daylight, mind the traffic, ask before photos.

18 Breakfast on the sand, in a paper cone
The Marina's snack carts. Come for sunrise and buy sundal from the morning sellers: chickpeas with mustard seed, curry leaves and coconut. Later, hundreds of stalls fry bajji and sell murukku and corn. Eat on the sand; swimming here is banned for its undercurrent.

21 Bessie's beach, after dark
Elliot's Beach food stalls, Besant Nagar. Besant Nagar's evening hangout: cafés, street food and a crowd. On the sand, chilli bajji and roast corn with masala and lime; on the road behind, cafes full of the city's young crowd. Calmer than the Marina; not a swimming beach either.

30 North India on George Town's Mint Street
Mint Street, Sowcarpet. George Town's Gujarati, Marwari and Jain quarter, on the street named for the old mint. Kakada Ramprasad, from 1958, for chaat and hot jalebi; Novelty Tea House for the pav bhaji it made a Chennai thing; then kachori, fafda, a murukku sandwich. Share plates.

SILK AND SOWCARPET

23 Bargain first, then the pavement
Pondy Bazaar, T Nagar. Sir Theagaraya Road's shopping stretch, officially Soundarapandianar Angadi, rebuilt with wide pavements for walking. Clothes, shoes and phones in the shops; on the pavement, used books, bangles, bags and hair bands. Pavement prices are a starting point: bargain, smiling.

26 India's oldest bookshop still open, they say
Higginbothams, Anna Salai. Since 1844, when an English librarian took over a struggling missionary bookshop. The Mount Road building, from 1904, was made for books: a high roof for air, few windows against dust. Called India's oldest bookshop still in business. Browse the Madras titles.

29 A burnt market, reborn in paperbacks
Moore Market's book stalls, by Central. Built in 1900 for Broadway's hawkers and gutted by fire in 1985; its booksellers moved to the complex beside Chennai Central. Still the city's biggest second-hand book market, about 150 shops, millions of books by the sellers' count. Bargain gently.

35 A kilometre of gadgets and odd finds
Burma Bazaar, Parry's Corner. A kilometre of shops beside Chennai Beach station, set up by Tamil families who fled Burma in the 1960s. Odd electronics and rare finds. Doubt the brand names, bargain hard, then go round the corner for atho.

39 Chennai's most crowded street, by reputation
Ranganathan Street, T Nagar. From Usman Road to Mambalam station, often called the most crowded street in Chennai, busiest before Deepavali. Clothes and gold in the big stores, hawkers selling everything down to safety pins. Walk it once for the crush; bag in front.

40 Where Kanchipuram silk comes to town
The silk houses of T Nagar, Panagal Park. T Nagar's street for Kanchipuram silk. The silk houses crowd round Panagal Park; Nalli, opposite, dates from 1928, founded by a Kanchipuram weaver. Real Kanchipuram is mulberry silk with zari, its border interlocked so it never comes away.

SABHAS AND KOLLYWOOD

14 India's first Test win, and the yellow roar
Chepauk (M. A. Chidambaram Stadium). Opened in 1916: India won its first Test here in 1952, and it saw cricket's second tied Test in 1986. Home of Tamil Nadu's sides: on IPL match days it turns yellow. Official tickets only; Chepauk MRTS is next door.

37 Where Bharatanatyam gets its polish
Kalakshetra. Founded in 1936 by Rukmini Devi Arundale, on a leafy 40-hectare campus near Besant Nagar since 1962: the school that shaped Bharatanatyam worldwide. Check its calendar for public performances, book ahead, and arrive before the dance begins.

FOR A TRUE MACHAN

5 Four streets, one long morning
The Mada streets, Mylapore. The four streets round the temple and tank: jasmine sellers, brass and steel shops, old verandah houses, and a fresh kolam on every doorstep at dawn. Walk the loop, then the lanes towards Luz. In January, the Mylapore Festival.

28 Red brick, a clock tower, trains north
Chennai Central. The red-brick terminus with the clock tower (1873, remodelled by Chisholm about 1900): one of South India's busiest. Check whether your train is from Central or Egmore. Metro next door; book autos on an app or agree the fare.

31 Madras's first town, still all business
George Town and Parry's Corner. The first settlement of Madras, renamed George Town in 1911: a dense grid of trading streets. Start at Parry's Corner, walk Armenian Street to the Armenian Church (1712, rebuilt 1772) and its six bells. A guided heritage walk helps.