

Kalpna Sunder

Of Steeples and Spires

Chennai is a city not just of temples, but of churches too

Towering temples, silk saris, fragrant filter coffee—those are the images that Chennai evokes in the mind of the average visitor. That is why this is a defining moment for me—I'm going to see the city, where I have lived for more than three decades, with new eyes, as a tourist! I am with young Navarre, a law student who guides people around the churches of this city, working part-time for a unique company called Story Trails, which specializes in theme-based tours.

Today's destination is **St. Thomas Mount**, located near the neighborhood of Guindy and close to the Chennai international airport. There's a marvelous view of the city, but the church is austere, just a plain white structure with no pretensions. Standing at this tranquil spot, it is difficult to imagine that this was where St Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, is said to have preached and was later murdered. I am standing on the mount, rising above Chennai. Locals today watch take offs and landing of planes at the international airport from here.

The church has a rough cross of carved granite said to be made by Thomas himself. Legend goes that Thomas was clutching the cross when he died and, periodically, there have been reports of the miracle of the cross bleeding. The other piece of history is an oil painting of Madonna and child supposed to be one of seven painted by another apostle, Luke. Navarre is knowledgeable and enthusiastic. He shows me Little Mount in the



St. Thomas Mount

distance, where the apostle was said to have stayed in a cave and escaped from his assailants through an underground tunnel to the mount. The story goes that Thomas was assassinated by an arrow in 72 AD. Despite the small size of the church, the place holds great significance for the Catholic Church, and Pope John Paul visited the site in 1986 (a statue of the Pope commemorates that visit). I leave this place imagining what the Europeans would have done with such a piece of

history—it would be a showpiece with parks, memorials, and cafes for tourists!

Next on our steeple trail is the white **Armenian Church** in the crowded George Town area, incongruously situated next to a very commercial Sangeetha Fast Foods store. We leave the hustle and bustle of the area as we enter the gigantic silver-studded black doors of this church that is topped by a Dutch gable and find ourselves under the shade of a huge mango tree. This church, with its wooden shutters and whitewashed conical dome, is one of the oldest in Chennai. It was constructed in 1772 AD, and is famous for its six belfries. Two of the bells come from the same source that made the bells for the Big Ben in London.

The Armenians came to India in the seventh century as merchants and traders and settled in coastal cities. About 350 Armenians have been laid to rest in the churchyard. Interestingly, Armenia, a land-locked nation in West Asia, was the first country to make Christianity its official religion in 301 AD.

The church in Chennai got a face-lift thanks to the initiative of a small Armenian community in Kolkata. The daily services stopped long ago; there are no Armenians left in Chennai. We see the grave of Reverend Shmavonian, who printed the first Armenian

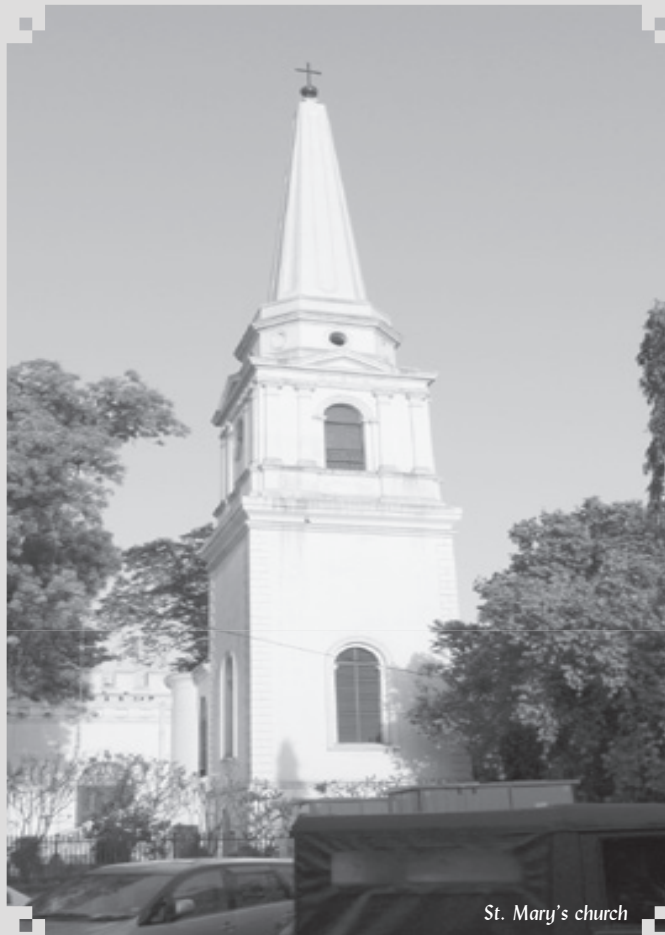


newspaper, *Azdarar*, here. A solitary caretaker tolls the bells here to break the silence of centuries. An oasis in the heart of clutter...

Hidden away in the bustling clamour of the dull yellow buildings of the Tamil Nadu Secretariat and the seat of the local government is the stately **St Mary's** church. This was meant for the devout British of the East India Company and dates back to 1678 AD. This was the first Anglican Church in India and is steeped in history. This was where Robert Clive got married, as well as Eliyu Yale (after whom Yale University was named). Nestled among neem and mango trees, its steeple pierces the blue skies. We see a flight of stairs from where dashing British soldiers and ladies in flowing dresses must have entered. We are told that the thick roof is bomb proof and could survive the onslaught of cannon balls! A tour of the church reveals its treasures—an amazing reproduction of the Last Supper, silver plates, and an ancient copy of the Bible! Navarre is an expert story teller and weaves magical tales of the churches. He says that Christianity in Chennai has always been contemporary and responsive to changes elsewhere in the world.

Built in 1516 AD, **Luz Church** is probably the oldest church in Chennai. It's a modest Portuguese structure, tucked into a quiet corner of busy Mylapore, and looks more like a private chapel. The insides have an altar in a riot of gilt and silver leaf. Legend has it that some Portuguese sailors, tossed around by the stormy seas, saw a mysterious light and were guided to the shores. After some time a church was constructed at this place and was dedicated to Our Lady of the Light (*Luz* means light in Portuguese). Some Mylapore residents believe that the Luz Church was the place where Saint Thomas spent some time recuperating from the physical strains of his journeys.

Our next stop is the **Santhome** Basilica. The area of Santhome is a sprawl of old houses with gardens, convents, and sandy beaches. Navarre shows me the holy ground where Thomas the apostle was



St. Mary's church

buried and the church constructed over his tomb. Santhome is one of the three churches in the world said to be built over the tomb of an apostle, the other two being St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Italy and the Saint James the Great in Santiago, Spain, the Santiago de

Compostela. Santhome Basilica was a Portuguese church until 1893 AD, when a neo-Gothic structure was raised. Inside we see proof of the intermingling of cultures—Jesus is flanked by peacocks and stands on a lotus! The stunning stained glass depicting Jesus appearing to the “doubting” Thomas, the pipe organ, and the wooden ceiling enthrall us. Marco Polo visited the tomb in 1292 AD and mentioned it in his travel diaries.

The last church on our “steeple” chase is **St Andrews Kirk**, a Presbyterian church on the busy traffic-ridden Poonamalee High Road. This neo-classical church was built for the Scottish community serving the East India Company during British rule. Corinthian columns, dark polished mahogany wood, and black and white chequered marble floors are all designed to impress. Inside the church I am awe-struck by the lapis lazuli ceiling with tiny stars (the constellations depict the Scottish skies so the worshippers wouldn't be homesick!), the polished pews and the extravagant 100-year-old pipe organ.

Navarre suggests the British Blueprints trail for our next adventure. Right now I'm high on churches. And proud that I know my city better than most locals. City of temples? ... Nah ... City of churches too!■

The author is a Japanese language specialist and travel writer based in Chennai.



Santhome Basilica

