

Place of the Singing Waves

A former Danish colony on the Tamil Nadu coast | By KALPANA SUNDER



Fort Dansborg houses a museum that contains Danish manuscripts, terracotta objects, figurines, and even part of a whale skeleton.

The town gate of Tranquebar, with the royal Danish insignia inscribed on it, is like a portal that admits visitors to a different era. From the midst of rural Tamil Nadu, travellers are suddenly transported into a historical oddity—a former Danish colony.

Called Tharangambadi (the place of the singing waves) before it was renamed by the Danes four centuries ago, this town was a prosperous trading port. Tranquebar is 15 km south of the ancient Chola town of Pimpurhar and a six-hour drive from Chennai. The old name, which is still in use, is evocative and lyrical, painting a picture of lives played around the vagaries of the waves. The thatched cottages and swaying

palms of the fishing village complement that image, while the salty tang of the ocean and the cries of sea gulls mingling with strains of Tamil music complete it.

The village's Danish connection began in 1618 when an admiral, Ove Giedde, landed on the coast and fell in love with its tranquillity. The Danish acquired trading rights from the Maharaja of Tanjore and built a fort here to strengthen their slice of the pepper trade. They lived in Tranquebar until 1842, when they could no longer afford to maintain overseas colonies, and sold it to the British East India Company.

A printing press was set up here in the early 1700s by the German Lutheran missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg—who

SANKARA SUBRAMANIAN

mastered Tamil and translated the Bible. His golden statue, with Bible in hand, looms large even today, at the corner of King and Queen Streets.

In 2004, the tsunami claimed the lives of a tenth of Tranquebar's population and destroyed many homes. Many fisher folk now live in government-built mass housing at the edge of the village. Efforts are underway to restore the village's mixed Indian and European architecture, through organisations like INTACH and the Danish Bestseller Foundation.

EXPLORE

LAZE For the laidback traveller, Tranquebar is heaven. Curling up on an old armchair with a book, watching the breakers bounce off the craggy rocks and the colourful fishing boats in the distance, is just one option. A **twilight stroll** on the boulder-strewn beach is relaxing, as are moments of quiet rumination spent sitting upon the ramparts of the fort. Most visitors come to Tranquebar to enjoy its tranquil and under-the-radar quality—watching the sun set as fishermen head home with the day's catch or looking out for migratory birds. Many hotels organise boat trips on the **Uppanar River** (10 mins from Fort Beach) to have a picnic lunch at a small, uninhabited island.

SOUL CURRY For the spiritually inclined,

there are several well-known places of worship within a radius of 50 km. **Chidambaram** (45 km/90 minutes) is home to temples of the dancing god Nataraja, while the 11th-century temple at **Thirukkadaiyur** (30 km/1 hour) is where Lord Shiva is said to have annihilated Yama, the god of death, to save Markandeya and bestow immortality on him. In Velankanni (38 km/1 hour), a Christian town known as the Lourdes of the East, is the renowned shrine **Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health**. The

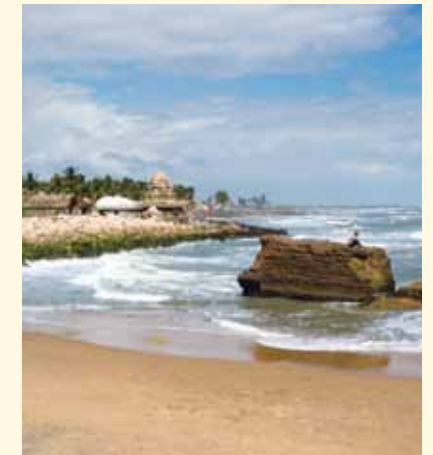


Ziegenbalg (left) was the first to translate the Bible into Tamil; The annual feast at the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health (above) in Velankanni attracts over a million visitors every year.

VIRTUALLY THERE

For the armchair traveller

Log on to the Tamil Nadu tourism website for a 360-degree virtual tour of Tranquebar. This interactive feature replicates the experience of walking through the streets of the former Danish colony. It is rich in detail and allows the viewer to stop and explore sights like the Dansborg Fort, the New Jerusalem Church, the Masilamani Nathar Temple, and even saunter at the rocky beach. Users can click and choose the direction they want to walk in, enter buildings and enlarge curious objects along the way. A virtual tour cannot compete with an actual visit to Tranquebar, but this



comes pretty close (www.tamilnadu-tourism.org and <http://view360.in/virtualltour/tharangambadi>).

dargah of **Saint Hazrat Meeran** in the seaside town of Nagore (25 km/40 minutes) is an important pilgrimage site for Muslims. The water in the holy tank is supposed to have curative powers.

WALK ABOUT History buffs can take a walking tour though the town (INTACH has a walking map which most hotels can supply). Begin at the town gate or the **Landporten** (as it is called in Danish) which is the first sight that catches the traveller's eye upon reaching Tranquebar.

It has the royal Danish insignia with the year 1792 inscribed on it (which was the year the old damaged gate was demolished and replaced by a new one). Lining both sides of King Street, there are colonial era buildings, carriage porches and stucco walls, a fort and majestic churches.

Rehling's House, a colonnaded house at the western end of the street, used to be the Danish Governor's residence. Next to it is **Van Theylingen house**, which is home to a small maritime museum.

Further south on King Street is the dilapidated **Zion Church**, which was one of the first Protestant churches of India, with both Indian and colonial architectural features. Opposite it is the **New Jerusalem Church** that was built when German missionaries arrived in 1718. It houses the grave of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg.

At the eastern end of this street is the mustard-coloured **Fort Dansborg** that was recently renovated. It faces a beach manned by food vendors and ice cream stalls. This was the residence of the governor and other officials, and also a prison and warehouse; it was built in the Scandinavian military style with stone walls and mounted cannons. The **museum** inside (open Sat-Thurs; 10 a.m.–5 p.m.) has quirky exhibits that range from whale skeletons to fossils, ancient coins, palm leaf manuscripts and old treaties between the Danish and the Indian king Maravarman Kulasekara Pandian.

Opposite the fort, across King Street, is the **Bungalow on the Beach**, once the summer

residence of the British Collector, now a restored boutique hotel with high ceilings and vintage furniture. On the beachfront at the southern end of the village is the ancient **Masilamani Nathar Temple** built in 1305. Ravaged by the battering sea, it was already fighting a losing battle, when the 2004 tsunami damaged it further. Finish the walk at the barren **Danish Cemetery** with its whitewashed graves on Kavalamettu Street (parallel to King Street).



Chettinad chicken has a thick gravy that is slow cooked with coconut and cashew nuts.

CULTURE VULTURE Visit the new **Tranquebar Cultural Resource Centre** in a renovated Tamil house at the end of Goldsmith Street. The Centre has been started by Upasana Design Studio, a socially-responsible design and garment manufacturer from Auroville, with the intention of reviving the culture and crafts of the village. Through training and marketing, the local population is being encouraged to revive their skills with palm leaf, bamboo, coconut shell and terracotta and turn them into livelihoods. Sip coffee at the small cafe and peruse the souvenirs.

STAY

There are upmarket as well as budget options, offered by the Neemrana Hotels group.

Bungalow on the Beach A colonial bungalow with a breathtaking view of the ocean. Rooms are named after Danish ships which docked in this town (97861 00461; www.neemranahotels.com; doubles ₹4,000).

Gate House A lovely bungalow just inside the entrance to the old town with a Danish facade and Tamil interiors (04364-289034; www.neemranahotels.com; doubles ₹3,000).

Nayak House This restored Tamil home on Goldsmith Street has four simple rooms arranged around a central courtyard (04364-289035; www.neemranahotels.com; doubles ₹1,000).

Hotel Tamil Nadu This is a budget hotel with rooms and dormitory accommodation; it is

also under Neemrana management (04364-289034; doubles ₹600; dorm for ₹150).

EAT

Food options are limited. The **Bungalow on the Beach** has Continental food and some Chettinad dishes on a fixed menu (₹450 per head). For some simple South Indian food, head to **Karthik Mess** near the bus stand (93607 68763). The **Cultural Resource Centre Cafe** serves honey crepes, lemon cakes and iced tea (Goldsmith Street, opposite Nayak House; 04364-289160; www.upasana.in).



A monument in memory of Ziegenbalg and Plütschau (left), the first Protestant missionaries to India; The town gate (above) welcomes visitors with a Danish emblem.

THE GUIDE

Orientation

Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) is on the Coromandel (east) coast, 280 km south of Chennai and 128 km east of Tiruchirappalli/Trichy, in Tamil Nadu state.

Getting there

Air There are daily flights from Chennai to Trichy, the nearest airport (128 km/4 hours from Tranquebar; taxis ₹3,000).
Road Tranquebar is 280 km/6 hours from Chennai (taxi ₹5,000). Government buses leave daily from Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminal (₹350) and private operators from behind CMBT (₹750).
Rail Nagapattinam (35 km/45 minutes) and Chidambaram (40 km/55 minutes) are the nearest stations. The overnight Nagore Express from is convenient.

Getting around

The most convenient way to get around town is to walk or hire a bicycle. Having a

car allows visitors the flexibility to make day trips to the nearby religious centres and towns.

Season

Tranquebar is a warm coastal town where the minimum temperature ranges between 21-26°C and the maximum between 29-36°C. The weather is most pleasant from August to March. Though it can get hot in summer (April-July), sea breezes make it bearable. During October and November, heavy rain and sometimes cyclones as well, can be expected.

Need to know

- The beach is crowded on Fridays when the fort is closed and people from neighbouring villages visit it.
- Be careful while swimming. There are only a few recommended pockets—the rest of the beach is unsafe for swimming.



Bungalow on the Beach is a shore front colonial bungalow that is now a hotel.

TIM HILL/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (CHICKENCURRY), BUNGALOW ON THE BEACH (HOTEL VERANDA)

SAURABH CHATTERJEE (CROSS), ABRAHAM CHACKO (GATEWAY), URMIMALA NAG (MAP)