



# PONDICHERRY

## A charming former French colony



**Homaed Ishaque Moon** loves travelling, adventure and photography

**HOMAED ISHAQUE MOON**

I boarded the Koromondol Express from Kolkata to Chennai at 3.20pm for a long journey. On my way, I met Anupam, an old friend from the Sandakfu-Phalut trek. It had been ten years since we last met. I took a taxi ride from Sreerampur station via Howrah to Shalimar station and had my lunch at a hotel before the journey to Chennai began.

While I was having my lunch, I thought of the heroes of the renowned book 'Adarsha Hindu Hotel' written by Bibhutibhuson Bandyopadhyay. The train journey across the diverse landscapes of India promised to be an enriching experience, filled with encounters with new places, people, and their captivating cultures.

The train would cover a distance of 1659km. I used the 'Where is my train' app, which anyone can use to find the locations of domestic trains in India in real-time. After one and a half days of journey, I finally reached

via Rock Beach Road. It was a proper hostel for low-budget backpackers. The air-conditioned, neat and clean rooms had wooden bunker beds with attached bathrooms and had the provision of cooking.

However, it was already 4:00pm and I was starving. So, I grabbed a sandwich from a local shop instead of cooking a meal for myself.

Tarun and Ganesh, students from Andhra Pradesh, were my roommates. After a little chit chat, we became "friends" and made a plan to hang out in the evening.

I went to the famous rock beach and asked them to join me. This beach was surrounded by huge black rocks, a Gandhi statue, a lighthouse, various food stalls and much more. Sri Aurobindo Ashram was another main attraction here. In 1926, this saint from Kolkata came here and established an ashram. Everyone could come here regardless of caste and religion.

No photography was allowed inside. You had to take off your shoes to enter. The



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Chennai's Dr Ram Chandran Central Railway Station.

I stayed the night at the place of an old friend and the next morning, I started my journey by bus to Pondicherry. It was a very enjoyable journey as the bus went along the coastline of the Bay of Bengal and it was similar to our Cox's Bazar marine drive road.

After four hours, I arrived at Pondicherry and the bus fare was only 183 rupees! My friend Matthew helped me to know about the city transportation and suggested I hire a scooter which was better than local transportation by all means. But I had only three days of experience on a scooter in Dhaka! However, I conjured up the courage to rent one and Matthew helped me to find a rental shop near Pondicherry bus stand with a good rate for two days. It cost only 850 rupees. Half a litre of oil was a bonus! I had to submit my passport copy.

Then I headed towards 'Anis Hostel'

interior was decorated with flower gardens. The aura of that place has a strange calming effect on my nerves. Devotees were sitting around and meditating in front of the tombs of Sri Aurobindo and Mata Mirra Alfassa.

The landscape of Pondicherry is fascinating in many ways. It's an embodiment of the French colonial past and the beautiful houses stand today as a reminder of that.

The French started coming here in the seventeenth century. The colonial period began earlier, with the Portuguese in 1505. The first Portuguese explorer to sail from Europe to India was Vasco da Gama, and he arrived on July 8, 1498 BCE. As time went on, the French became fascinated by the beauty of Pondicherry and started investing in the textile sector. Pondicherry is now called Puducherry on paper.

The city of Pondicherry in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu was in the hands of French colonialists until 1954. The history of Pondicherry was recorded only after the arrival of Dutch, Portuguese, British and French traders.

Puducherry or Puducheri was a trading centre that was a destination for

Roman trade from the 3rd century BC. In 1674, the French East India Company established a trading post at Pondicherry, which eventually became the main French settlement in India.

Your Hindi knowledge won't be of any help in Tamil Nadu as most don't know it. Both English and Tamil are spoken here.

I learned a few words from them. Nantri means thank you, kalai vanakkam means good morning, epadi irukinga means how are you, how much - ibbalubu rubai. However, they are hard to pronounce. So, having a Tamil-speaking person around is very helpful.

It was Tarun and Ganesh's first trip to Pondicherry too. They had bikes with them and gave us the freedom to move around. We decided to go around to Serenity Beach. It was about eight kilometres away. Drinking and chatting, the three of us had a good time on the beach. We had just met, but we felt no inhibition in sharing and disclosing thoughts. That's the beauty of travelling and keeping an open heart.

Present is and always has been the focus for me. And out of all of the creation, humans attract me the most. A simple interaction with a "simple" human being has always attracted me more than exploring the past glory, be it a magnificent monument or a wonder of nature. I can spend hours, days and months among strangers.

I believe there is no bad person in the world as Buddhadev Guha, quoting his father, said, "No person in the world is bad. There is nothing "bad" in this world. The worst, the darkest; has a better or brighter side - Ignore the dark side, only then you will realize that there is no bad person in this world. Not much of a bad thing."

After having a great time at the beach, we went to eat the very popular 'Taka Pizza' of Pondicherry. This is not the currency of

our country, but the name of the pizza shop is 'Taka Pizza'.

The next morning was bright and full of good vibes. Eager to explore, I hopped on my scooter and headed towards 'White Town.' The charming two-storied houses of the French Colony lined the streets, each adorned with colourful flowers on the balconies. Some houses boasted large plants with hanging stems, resembling Baganbolia, while others stood tall beside big trees, creating a unique and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere.

The locals were either walking or cycling to their workplaces, adding to the vibrant scene. Captivated by this colourful combination along the roads of White Town, I carefully framed the scene with my camera, preserving the memory of the picturesque moment.

These houses, once residences, had now transformed into diverse establishments such as government offices, embassies, and charming cafes. Notably, I even spotted Allianz France's Pondicherry branch tucked away in one of the lanes, adding a touch of international presence to the quaint surroundings.

All the cafes were beautifully decorated to attract tourists. A few good shops of French Bakery came into view. We went to an old house cafe called 'Dez' for a French breakfast. The house was full of antique collections. French music was playing, the visitors were busy conversing.

I visited a few bakery and pastry shops to taste the French delicacies. And they were delicious, no doubt. The whole atmosphere was so vibrant and colourful and yet so foreign. I even heard Indians there using French to communicate with each other.

Some places never feel old or boring even if you visit them again and again, Pondicherry is one of them.

