Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/439417328/

Downloaded on Apr 23, 2026

Viewing temples – on the beach – in India

By David Churbuck
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

MAHABALIPURAM, India – We arrived in Mahabalipuram at 1 a.m., exhausted and on edge from a harrowing 9-hour, 275-mile taxi ride from the temple city of Madurai to the south. Two weeks in India and an overly ambitious itinerary had sapped us of our wanderlust; all we wanted was a beach to sit on before pushing on for the rest of our adventure.

With no hotel reservations awaiting us and only a dog-eared guidebook for assistance, I tried to direct our driver down the unmarked streets of the sleeping village. He spoke Tamil better than English, and neither of us did very well in Hindi, so, rather than listen to me, he stopped in front of an all-night tea stall and asked a young man to hop in and help us find a place to stay.

Our would-be guide tried to direct us to a hotel not listed in our guide ("India: A Travel Survival Guide," Lonely Planet, 1987), but one rule learned early in India is to aim for a sure thing one's first night in a new place. Hunt for a better bed in the light of morning, but take no chances if arriving at night. So we declined his offer (a wise decision, we learned the next day) and drove a mile north of town on the Madras coast road to the Silversands Beach Resort.

After nine hours of sitting in the back seat of a cab that had been in a constant state of passing everything from ox carts to tank trucks toting hydrochloric acid, the Silversands was like walking out of the woods and finding the Emerald City of Oz. Our cab slowly rocked down a sandy lane past bungalows screened by a stand of slender pine trees, past low blue and red lights to the beach.

On the beach – the Bay of Bengal and the Cormorin Coast as exotic as their names under the moonlight – we sipped a bottle of Indian beer and shared a fresh and spicy fish curry while the surf crashed ashore and the trade winds blew away our memories of the inland heat. We found our room, the bed very regal under a mosquito net, switched on the air conditioning and settled down for one of the best sleeps in all our 18 nights in the country.

Think of tropical beach paradises, and India doesn't leap to mind. Goa, an old Portuguese enclave taken over by hippies in the 1960s, is a very popular beach resort among British, Eastern European and Asian travelers, too popular in some minds, including the natives'. So we decided to skip the almost obligatory trip to Goa and went to Mahabalipuram, on the opposite coast, 30 miles south of Madras, known for its cloth and the headquarters of the long-gone English East India Co.

Beach, temples and relaxation

Mahabalipuram's attractions are many, but the obvious ones are its beach, temples and slow pace. The contrast between its streets and sandy paths and the chaotic avenues of Madras is like walking a Nantucket lane after trying to cross Storrow Drive at rush hour. The shore temples and other examples of 7th- and 8th-century religious architecture have made Mahabalipuram a pilgrimage center for Indians and young foreigners alike.

The beach draws a constant stream of Soviet tour groups – in the week we were in residence at the Silversands, we shared the beach with four groups of 50 Soviets each – and, of course, people like ourselves looking for some respite from Boston in February. The mix of people staying in Mahabalipuram was refreshing: European students on three month journeys through the subcontinent, flashy Indian Air Force pilots trying to imitate Tom Cruise, honeymooning Indians and reserved Russians.

As we ate our breakfast of masala dosas (thin crepes stuffed with spiced potatoes) and drank our tea on the beach, the owner of the Silversands welcomed us and said he would have the best room in the resort available at lunch if we desired. The price? 1,100 rupees ($65) a night for an air-conditioned bedroom with bar, refrigerator, attached bath and shower, ocean view from the foot of the bed and a beach view down to the shore temples from the attached porch and private sun deck. Meals were not included, but, as we later learned, a half-hour walk down the beach to the village would yield a great lunch or dinner for 20 to 50 rupees ($1.18-$2.96).

Lodging in the village can cost as little as 200 rupees ($11.80) a night for a room without an air conditioner or mosquito net, to 1,500 rupees ($88.65) for deluxe rooms in the beach resorts north along the coast.

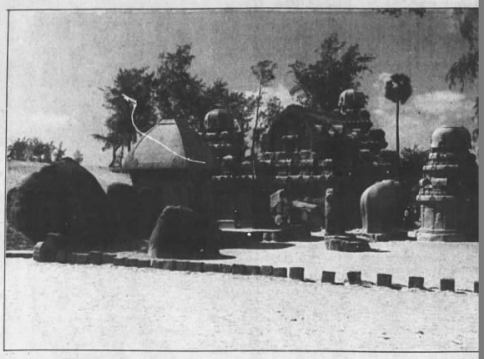


PHOTO / DAVID CHURBUC

The shore temples and other examples of 7th- and 8th-century religious architecture have made Mahabalipuram a pilgrimage center for Indians and young foreigners alike.

Walking was our preferred mode of transportation, although the Silversands offered a free shuttle into the village and bicycles were available for 10 rupees (59 cents) a day. I wouldn't recommend bicycles simply because of the maniacal bus and truck traffic on the roads, but rickshaws and cabs are available at all hours.

Sightseeing and basking

The nicest aspect of life in Mahabalipuram was the opportunity to sightsee and bask on the palm-lined beach without too much effort or planning. The historically significant rock carvings that lie behind the village can be explored in half a day, and a day trip to the temple at Tirukkalikundrum, 8.5 miles inland, is well worth the taxi or bus ride and subsequent steep climb to the top of the hill complex, where, legend has it, a pair of eagles from the holy city of Benares arrive every day at noon to be fed by a priest.

Beach life in Mahabalipuram consists of finding a deserted piece of sand, putting up with the constant offers to buy everything from postcards to Russian caviar (brought to town by the cash-poor Soviets) and smearing on the sunscreen. Swimming is OK, but beware of the riptides – there are no lifeguards on duty but plenty of fishermen hauling nets or launching their boats.

It seems that every city and state in India is renowned for one shopping bargain or another. In Mahabalipuram, the big bargains are stone carvings, since the village is the home of the national sculpture school and supplies most of the country with temple work and religious statuary. Don't worry about bringing enough tropical clothes; there are a half-dozen tailors who will measure, cut and sew everything from a Madras shirt to a pair of pajamas in less than a day for very reasonable prices.

Because Mahabalipuram is in Tamil Nadu, the most "Indian" of India's 17 states, vegetarianism reigns supreme on most menus. There are three or four good seafood restaurants, including the very popular Rose Garden restaurant opposite the Tamil Nadu State Youth Hostel on the beach temple road. All beach hotels serve vegetarian and Western meals and offer beer and alcohol as well.

Beer prices at the resorts are a little steep compared with prices at the wine shops in the village: 40 rupees ($2.36) vs. 12 rupees (71 cents), so buy a cotton shoulder bag and stock up on your own beer and bottled water. Salt tablets are a good idea to pack in your medicine bag for those long days spent exploring temples under the tropical sun.

If you go

Mahabalipuram is in season from November to February. The legendary Indian heat starts building in late February, reaching a peak in July when the southeast monsoons arrive and cool things down through the fall. Room rates rise and fall according to the season.

Getting there is no problem, since Madras boasts an international airport with domestic connections to most major Indian cities. If you plan on spending more than three nights at the Silversands, the resort will send a complimentary driver to Madras to meet your plane. There is frequent bus service to the village from the Madras Central bus station.

Air fares to New Delhi from Boston can run from $1,200 round trip to $4,000 in first class. Domestic flights on Indian Airlines are expensiv about $300 round trip from Ne Delhi to Madras. There is a trai from New Delhi to Madras, but takes 40 hours, so it may be a b much for a traveler concerned abou time.

Mahabalipuram is best visite near the end of one's Indian vaca tion. A trip to Madurai and the spec tacular Shree Meenakshi Temple ar worth the journey, as are Tiruchir appalli (Trichy) or the English hi stations at Ootacamund and Kodai kanal. Travel is difficult in India, th bureaucracy at the train stations an airports is mind-boggling, and th heat can wear down one's enthusi asm, so save the beach for last, whe you need it the most, or plan it half way in your travels, as we did, be fore moving on to the rest of the magnificent country.

David Churbuck is the Boston-based associate editor of Computers and Communications for Forbes.

Creature comforts.

FROM $36.00 Per Room*

Capture the beauty of the changing season out in the country — and discover a brand new concept in country hospitality! Treat your whole family to our cozy accommodations, with a host of extras, like old-fashioned country comforters. Piping hot coffee all day, with our compliments. Soft, plush towels. And plenty of other surprises, all at a price that'll let you rest easy! Lose yourself for a few days and discover the country hospitality difference.

Countryline® Reservations:
800-456-4000
Toll-free in the U.S. and Canada

UNITED STATES
KENTUCKY
Cadiz (*98) • Radcliff (*62)
MAINE
Bangor (*69) • Brunswick (*69)
MICHIGAN
Holland (*69) • Ishpeming (*67)
MINNESOTA
(Minneapolis Area)
Burnsville (*59)
Chanhassen (*57)
Coon Rapids (*56)
MISSOURI
(St. Louis Area)
Saint Charles (*56)
NORTH DAKOTA
Fargo (*51) • Grand Forks (*42)
NEW JERSEY
Millville (*51)
WISCONSIN
Houston (*47) • Sparta (*37)
CANADA
MANITOBA
Thompson (*67) • Winnipeg (*46)
NEW BRUNSWICK
Moncton (*69) • Saint John (*49)
NOVA SCOTIA
Dartmouth/Halifax (*49)
SASKATCHEWAN
Saskatoon (*48)

COUNTRY HOSPITALITY
*Rates are single room, single guest. Rates may vary seasonally.
A Cozy Stay At A Comfortable Price™

CHRIS KELLY KNOWS A LI
WHERE THE VIEW IS BREA
BUT THE PRICES AREN'T.

FLORIDA

1990 Toyota Tercel
We feature Toyota and other fine cars.

$89 Economy car for 1 Unlimited mileage LDW Option $10 per day or less.

Copyright © 2026 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.