



Temple Trail

Sangam, meaning ‘confluence’ in the Tamil language, brought together poets and scholars of ancient southern India, known as Tamilakkam. It heralded prosperous times for Tamil literature and arts, some of which have been chiselled across temples of the **Sangam land**.

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Lush greenery with vast stretches of paddy fields on either side of the meandering Kaveri and Kollidam rivers welcome visitors to the Delta region of Tamil Nadu. Comprising the culturally vibrant cities of Thanjavur and Kumbakonam, often dotted with sky-touching coconut trees pooled around parched lands where the river had changed its course, this region was once part of the Sangam—land of richness and prosperity, where art, literature and architecture flourished. With the temple city of Madurai as its hub, Sangam land is stretched far and wide.

The Sangam period spanned from 300 BCE to 300 CE. The poems from this time were composed by Tamil men and women coming from all stratas of society, and are collectively called Sangam literature. A total of 2,381 poems were composed by 473 poets, many of whom remained anonymous. From the Pandyas to the Cholas, each of the dynasties nurtured and nourished art and literature across the land of Sangam.

While Pandyas seeded a renaissance through Sangam literature, Pallavas made a leap in architecture by transiting from rock-cut to stone architecture, and subsequently, Cholas took art and literature to mammoth proportions and grandeur that remain unmatched till date. It should not come as a surprise that these Sangam dynasties had the foresight to construct temples and structures that endured the test of times, giving them a sacred space amongst distant lands.

POETRY IN STONE

Airavateswara Temple at Darasuram is a fine example of Chola architecture, and is a repository of micro carvings and sculptures. First-timers to the temple could find it daunting and overwhelming—where to look, what sculpture to ponder over, and which to give a miss—as every nook and corner of the temple facade is adorned with intricately chiselled beauties of granite.

The temple of Rajarajeshwara in Darasuram was built by Rajaraja II in the year 1167. He ruled the Chola empire from 1146 CE to 1173 CE. The deity here was originally named Rajarajeshwara. However, in the later years, people started referring to the presiding deity as Airavateswarar, owing to the legend surrounding the place.



There's a legend that tells the story of Airavata, the majestic white elephant used as a vehicle by Lord Indra, who was once cursed by Sage Durvasa to lose its pristine white colour. Heart-broken and humiliated, Airavata is said to have prayed to Lord Shiva at the very spot and regained its white colour after taking a dip in a nearby temple tank. From then on, the Shiva *linga* here has been known as Airavateswara. The original Rajarajeshwara temple had been much larger. Owing to the destruction of the surrounding temples by invaders, much of the complex was lost.

Unlike the elaborate *vimana* (spire) and tall constructions of the Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram Temple, the Airavateswarar Temple at Darasuram falls short with its 80 feet five-tiered *vimana*, but compensates in grandeur with its intricacy. Finely

(Clockwise from facing page) The temple complex of Gangaikondacholapuram; the city of Kumbakonam is known for its complexes with intricate architecture; an old sculpture at Gangaikondacholapuram



From the rare sculpture of Ardhanarisurya, to the majestic Nagaraja and Goddess Ganga—each sculpture is unique.



chiselled basaltic sculptures, brought home by the Chola rulers as war trophies, adorn the niches of the temple walls at Darasuram. From the rare sculpture of Ardhanarisurya (hermaphrodite form of the Sun god), to the majestic Nagaraja and Goddess Ganga—each of these sculptures are a class apart and carved to perfection. The boulders and blocks of granite that had been meditatively chiselled with love and labour now serve as props and characters for mighty stories of Shiva and the Cholas. The excavated stones that lie at a corner inside the temple premises look like a craftsmen's workplace from a bygone era.

The main temple, itself, is divided into various *mandapam* (hall). The Rajagambhiran mandapam is designed in the form of a chariot and has ornate pillars and columns. The curled balustrades with royal elephants and *makaras* carved on the stairs leading to the *mandapam* look resplendent. They appear to accord a hearty welcome to visitors into a mystical world, where the inanimate seem to get animated as you amble through. After all, the philosophy behind the Rajarajeswara temple is all about '*nithya vinodam*', which means perpetual amazement, and surely the carvings and sculptures live up to the philosophy.

The Rajagambhiran mandapam has eight pillars that have the mythical Yali (Yazhi) carved at its base. Yali is a mythical creature with the face of an elephant but the body of a lion, the



(Clockwise from facing page) A nayaka painting of Saraswati at Brihadiswara Temple; a kid and the temple elephant at Adi Kumbeswarar temple interacting in their own way; the temple of Rajarajeshwara in Darasuram

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

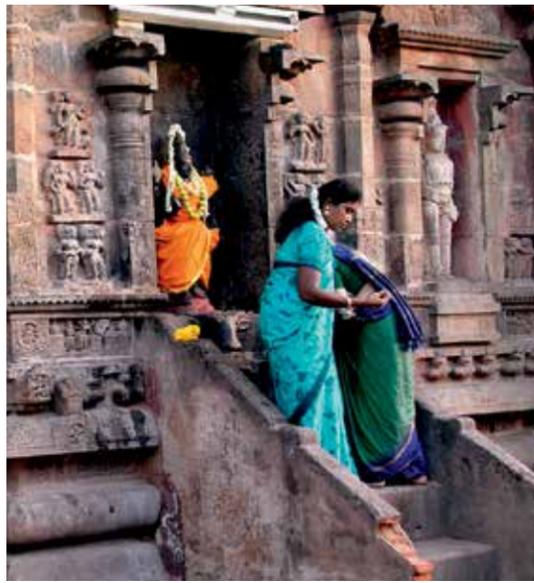
Darasuram is close to Kumbakonam, whereas Gangaikondacholapuram is nearer to Chidambaram. Both are well-connected by road transport to Thanjavur. Thanjavur is well-connected by rail and road from Chennai. The nearest airport is at Tiruchirapalli (Trichy), which is about 70 km from Thanjavur. State and private buses, taxis and mini-vans ply regularly on these routes.

SHOP

While in Darasuram, one can shop for Darasuram silk saris, spun in traditional homes around the temple. Bronze sculptures made near Swamimalai make for great antiques. Also, one can shop for Tanjore paintings while in Thanjavur. These make for pretty souvenirs.

STAY

There are several stay options available in and around Darasuram. For a comfortable stay, choose Paradise Resort (www.paradiseresortindia.com).



These infinite carvings have their texture intact, compelling visitors to perceive the emotions that went into making these pieces of Chola grandeur and fame.

ears are that of a pig with horns of a ram and tail of a cow! The mythical creatures of Yali pretend to be ferocious and very similar to each other, but on keen observation reveal themselves with their tails curled differently and articulated in depth. The beautiful micro-carving of Shiva doing a *thandavam* (cosmic dance) and the expression of trance is truly captivating!

The statue of Kannapar, a great proponent of Shaivism in Sangam land, stands humbly with hands folded in the niches of the Mookahmandapam. The footwear of the chiselled hunter-turned-poet is sure to give today's fashion industry a run for their money. The straps and the toe-thong have been carefully cut and smoothed keeping in mind the comforts of the wild wanderer. And to envision such precision, more than a thousand years ago, is indeed mind-blowing. Four of the pillars in this *mandapam* also have carvings and sculptures with renditions of the Skanda Purana, a humungous total of 48 sculptures, with 12 on each pillar.

The Ardhamandapam has plain pillars devoid of carvings, unlike the other two *mandapams*.



A repository of micro carvings and sculptures, Airavateswara Temple at Darasuram is a fine example of Chola architecture

Photography ALAMY and SHUTTERSTOCK

This is a permanent feature in all Sangam temples and is done to facilitate undivided attention towards the divine deity. The Ardhamandapam connects the Mookahmandapam with Garbagriha.

The Darasuram Airavateswara temple is replete with micro carvings detailed to perfection. These carvings measure between one to two inches in height, but are articulated in a detailed fashion that seems to be a trademark of the skilled Chola sculptures. A visitor can envision dancers showcasing their best performances as the crowd cheers, musicians enthralled spectators, mermaids having a frolicking time in the sea, a lady belonging to the gypsy clan performing gymnastics—a slice of life during the Chola era comes alive. These infinite carvings and motifs have their sharpness and texture intact, compelling visitors to perceive the emotions that went into making these pieces-de-resistance of the Chola grandeur and fame!

The ceilings too brim with carvings of various dance poses, *mudras*, sun and star signs and more. The highlight of the temple are the sculptures

of the 63 Nayanmar (proponents of Shaivism) and their life stories from the mesmerising Periyapuram. Daily-life sculptures, themes surrounding women warriors, humour in the domestic lives of warriors, and common man are all part of the splendour of the Darasuram micro carvings.

It is an astounding effort to bring out the expressions on these hard granites, to give life and details in such fine proportions! Every nook and corner in this wonderland of sculptures and carvings echoes creativity and impressions. It is as if the Chola sculptors and craftsmen were going about their work in a meditative process seeking perfection in all those 12 years of making this Airavateswara temple at Darasuram.

UNPARALLELED EPIC

Sangam land not only boasts of micro-carvings and sculptures, but also harbours the Big Temple of Thanjavur, which has been constructed in mammoth proportions and surpasses all others in architectural splendour even after thousands of years. This mystery and wonderment is indeed befitting the heroic Raja Chola, one of the most loved and revered of the Chola kings, who had initiated the construction of the Brihadeeswarar or Big Temple of Thanjavur.

ELEGANCE IN STONE

Gangaikondacholapuram is the lost city of the Cholas, and what remains of this once thriving capital of Rajendra Chola (one of the widely successful Chola kings) is the Brihadiswara Temple at Gangaikondacholapuram in Ariyalur district of Tamil Nadu. It is the most elegant of the three living Chola temples and is said to be a replica of the Big Temple of Thanjavur, though smaller and feminine in its architecture.

The dynasties of Pandyas, Pallavas, Cholas and Cheras have left innumerable temples with sacred carvings and sculptures that are being painstakingly given a new lease of life by the Archaeological Survey of India. Apart from the temples of Darasuram, Gangaikondacholapuram and the Big Temple of Thanjavur that have been accredited with the UNESCO heritage tag and collectively called the 'Great Living Chola Temples', the Meenakshi Amman temple at Madurai, built by the Pandyas and the shore temples of Mahabalipuram near Chennai, built by the Pallavas, are worth visiting for their architectural splendour and bas-reliefs in this Sangam land. ♦