

travel

with Stephen McCarty

Tranquil in Tranquebar

If you're longing for peace amid the bedlam that is India, head for a curious colonial relic in the country's south, writes Keith Mundy.

India: rich in culture, odour, history, noise, extraordinary people, vehicular mayhem, magnificent sights, pitiable poverty. Especially in the deep south state of Tamil Nadu, which is steamy, vividly colourful, exuberant, spectacularly templated, teeming with pilgrims, over-the-top in every way.

The sensory input can reach overload; there can come a point where all you want to do is sink into a seaside deckchair, but where? The Coromandel Coast presents hundreds of kilometres of sandy beaches but is almost devoid of resorts, a situation not helped by the 2004 tsunami. But here there is an easygoing place, ignored by guide books, that miraculously possesses a decent hotel, with a fascinating history to boot and many well-kept relics to support it.

Trundling by Ambassador taxi towards the old French enclave of Karaikal, skirting the village of Tarangampadi, I glimpse a sign touting a guest house. We follow its directions and a baroque white stucco gateway appears. The portly car eases through it and we proceed along a main street lined with old schools, convents, churches and a golden statue of Bach, Handel or some such bewigged apparition from 18th-century Europe.

Suddenly, as the sea comes into view, a vast earthen square spreads before us. Lording over it is a huge colonial fort. Facing it across the square is an elegant, two-storey mansion – a heritage hotel. Beyond, the ocean waves lap the shore. Settling into the magic of breezy verandahs, white cane chairs and a four-course French meal, I begin to learn about where I am.

The Danes called it Trankebar, which the French and English made Tranquebar. It's a wonderful example of the magnetic pull India had on the European powers. After the Portuguese and the Dutch, but before the British and the French, the Danes came seeking a toehold in which to trade for the riches of India. In 1620, Admiral Ove Gedde signed an agreement with the king of Thanjavur, who ruled the highly fertile Cauvery River

Pictures: Keith Mundy



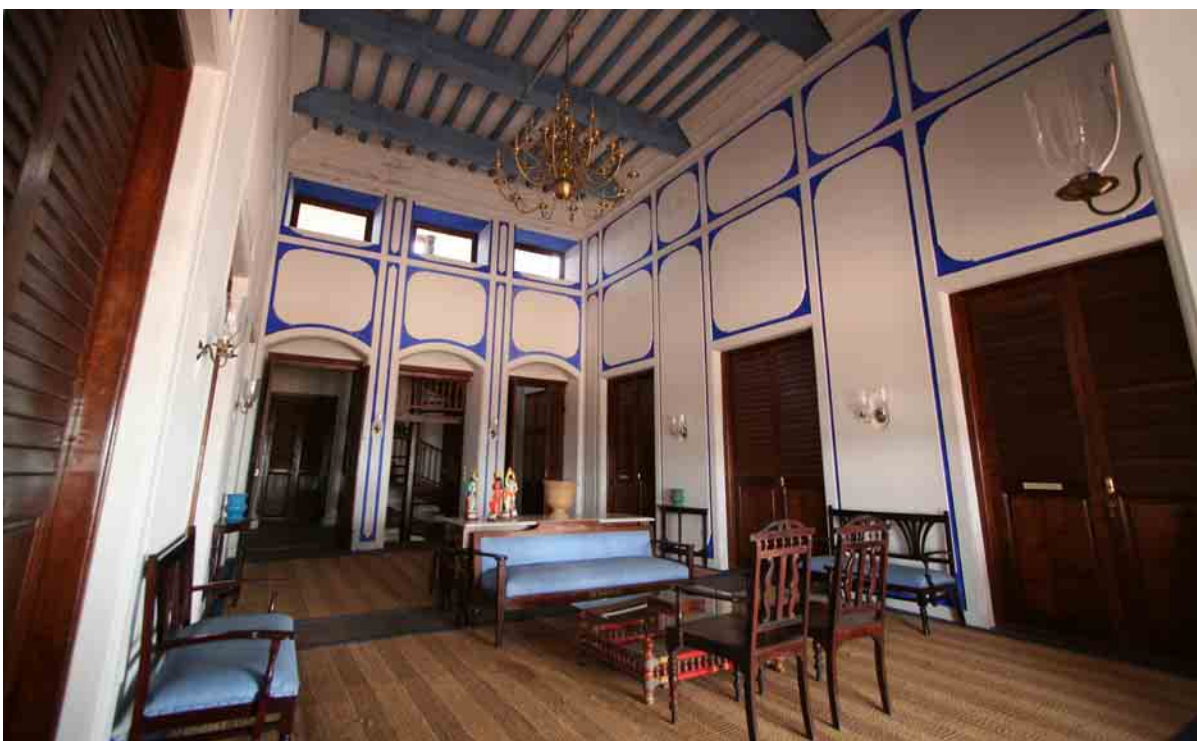
basin and its coast. This assigned the coastal village of Tarangampadi and its immediate surroundings to the Danish East India Company.

The Danes built a moated fort on the seafront, a sea wall and ramparts enclosing an area of about 500 square metres. The colony reached its apogee of prosperity in the 18th century; even so, it never fulfilled Copenhagen's hopes. A maximum of two Danish ships a year left the Baltic Sea for the Bay of Bengal. There wasn't even a port: ships had to anchor offshore and goods were ferried in rowing boats that battled the surging breakers.

The most successful trade was in religion. Christianity sold well in Tranquebar, its supreme merchant a German called Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1682-1719), whose legacy looms large. His exotic image, in portraits, bas-

reliefs and statues, is prominently displayed in the main streets. He is the golden man, frock-coated, Bible in hand, standing on the corner of King's and Queen's streets, facing the dazzling white stucco of Zion Church.

Despite *ziegenbalg* meaning "goatbellows" and the often sad outcomes of missionary zeal, he cuts a positive figure. He was a German Lutheran priest sent by the Danish king in 1706 to convert the heathens. The Indians didn't mind; having several million gods already, one more was just grist to the holy mill. Plus, the German was plainly a good man. Far from castigating the locals for their pagan misdeeds, Ziegenbalg learned Tamil and local customs. He translated the New Testament into colloquial Tamil and set up the first printing press in the region – along with other beneficial institutions, leaving until last



Clockwise from far left: sunset over Tranquebar's seafront; the 14th-century Masilamani Nathar Temple; a fisherman with his catch of the day; a statue of German missionary Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg; Danish elegance in the historic Bungalow on the Beach hotel; playing cricket on the former parade ground of Fort Dansborg.



his New Jerusalem Church of 1718, now gleaming after a Ziegenbalg tercentenary renovation.

Today, almost all the large buildings in Tranquebar are Christian: hostels, schools, colleges, churches. But mostly it's a small town of thatched cottages set beside sleepy earthen lanes and beneath swaying palms. Then there's the fort, which stands apart.

Fort Dansborg was the citadel where the Danes holed up for their first decades, a little Elsinore beside the Indian Ocean. Recently renovated, its four-square structure of sandy-hued ramparts and three-storey quarters topped by conical pinnacles commands the seafront with a quirky European air. Inside, an odd assembly of relics – cracked Danish porcelain, rusty weapons, faded documents – masquerades as a museum but it's enough to conjure up some images of how things were.

Beyond the fort, a deserted beach stretches to a shallow river mouth, where cattle rest on a sandy bank. In the other direction, the foreshore leads to another atmospheric monument, Masilamani Nathar Temple. Built in 1305 by the Pandya empire's King Kulasekaran, the Hindu temple has been so sea-battered, half of it lies ruined in the pounding waves.

Despite this, the sea generally gets good press in Tarangampadi, which means "place of the singing waves" in Tamil. That changed on Boxing Day, 2004. M.A. Sultan runs a general store under the canny name of Danish Shop beyond a baroque archway, 500 metres back from the beach. Small and sprightly, he says of December 26, 2004: "All of a sudden water flooded the street and my shop, then rushed out again. It was a terrible shock."

Today, Tranquebar bears little evidence of the tragedy, when the waves wiped out the fishermen's quarter and took about 600 souls, 10 per cent of the population. Indirect signs are clear though: tsunami-relief offices, appeals to help orphans and, colourfully, the charity-donated fishing boats on the beach: dozens of dazzlingly painted fibreglass vessels that create a carnival atmosphere.

Fishing is back in full swing and Tranquebar is on an upward curve, with relief and investment money making its mark. In my brief stay, the amount of sealed road trebled when two streets running parallel to paved King's Street were concreted in a fit of development.

Having made few krone out of the colony, the Danes left, selling up in 1845 to the British, who installed their tax collector in a grand new house on the seafront. But the British had much bigger Indian fish to fry and Tranquebar faded into obscurity and penury. The Danes pay a lot of attention to the town now, funding several aid and research projects here. Realising the tourism potential is one aim.

But so far there is nothing touristy about Tranquebar, despite its having a lovely hotel created out of the abandoned mansion of the British tax collector. Reinvented in Danish colonial style, it is a fount of antique

European elegance, with room names such as Prince Christian and Countess Moltke, on whose wind-fanned verandah one is lulled by the song of the waves.

The current revival leaves the languor of the place little disturbed; rather, it adds a comforting sense of progress to an old-world backwater. A unique time capsule, this is the only one of the colonial ports in India that retains its historical character to any great degree.

Getting there: Thai International Airways (www.thaiairways.com.hk) flies from Hong Kong to Madras via Bangkok. Indian Airlines (indian-airlines.nic.in) flies from Madras to Tiruchirapalli, the nearest airport to Tranquebar. For accommodation at the Bungalow on the Beach hotel see www.neemranahotels.com.