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INDIAN EDITION

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A VERY FRENCH AFFAIR

PUDUCHERRY A handful of locals are recreating the spirit of this colonial jewel. Prasad Ramamurthy picks five charming homes for you to stay in. Photographs by Monika Ghurde

GRATITUDE FOR PEACE & QUIET
No sooner had Gratitude opened for business that it became the hottest 'non-hotel' of the season. Especially after it became the set for Oscar-winning director Ang Lee's eagerly-awaited *Life of Pi*—the cinematic adaptation of the 2002 Man Booker Prize winner. The 150-year-old villa has been restored for the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in keeping with its original French-Creole architecture. So the eight rooms, which are set on two floors around a central courtyard, are furnished with pieces rescued from neighbouring French-Tamil homes. The slatted wooden windows are combined with Athangudi tiles and the exposed brick work with red oxide flooring. Room sizes vary and can accommodate up to three guests. Gratitude markets itself as 'a place of quietude' so there are no TVs, but you can play →



Gratitude sits on a quiet side street in the French Quarter of Puducherry.

Zoned in... Pondicherry

■ You can smell the fresh croissants at the **Auroville Bakery** from 50 yards away. Made by a French-led team from the Auroville ashram, the pains au chocolat are as good as any you'll find in a Paris boulangerie. **Auroville Main Road, Kuilapalayam**

SHOP

La Maison Rose is a gorgeous, petal-pink villa that houses a trio of fashion and interiors boutiques (try Amethyst for chic jewellery and clothes), and a delightful courtyard restaurant serving European-influenced dishes. Go in the early evening to mix shopping with drinks and dinner under the fairy-lit mango trees. **8 rue Romain Rolland (00 91 413 421 0806)**

■ The graphics impresario behind **Play Clan** has collaborated with everyone from Paul Smith to the Park Hotels, and his new Pondicherry store is a riot of fun decals and covetable design products.

The funky, India-inspired stationery and kitchenware make great souvenirs. **First floor, 59 rue Suffren (www.theplayclan.com)**

■ Browse colourful Tamil art and elegant colonial furniture, including teak planter's chairs, at **Curio Centre**, which has been run by the same family for three generations. **40 rue Romain Rolland (00 91 413 222 5676)**

SEE

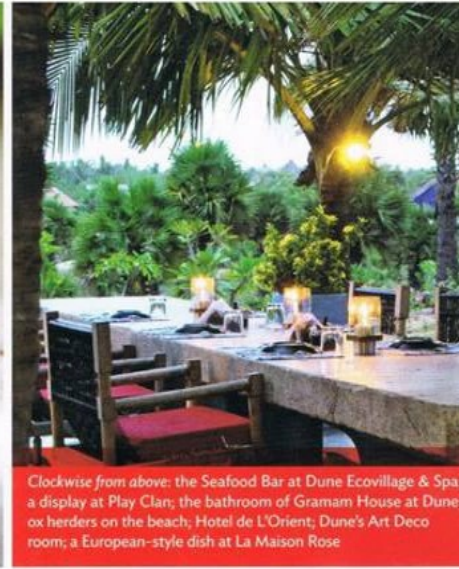
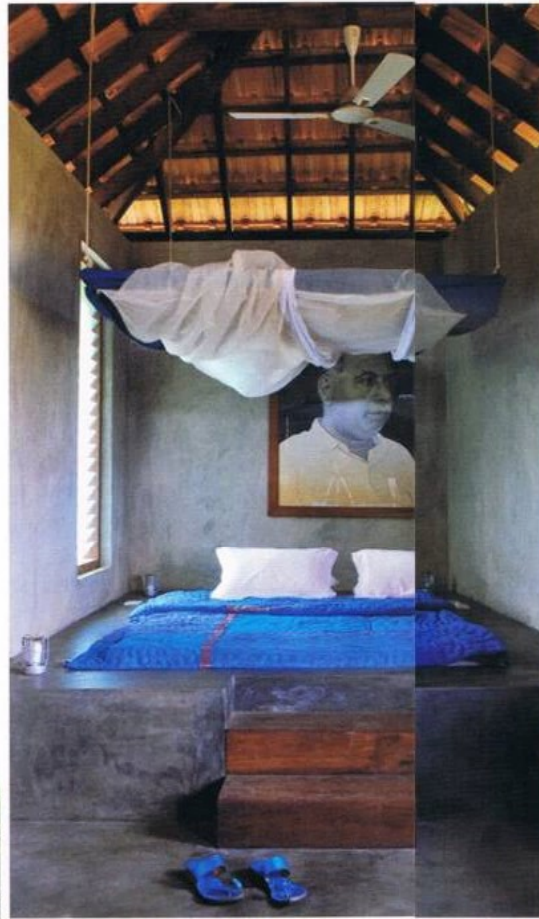
Whether you're in search of enlightenment or just plain curious, check out **Auroville Visitors Centre**, 8km outside Pondicherry. An experimental township founded in 1968, the community is home to people of 45 nationalities – all of whom follow the teachings of The Mother, the late Mirra Alfassa. Particularly impressive is the Matrimandir, a huge

golden globe used as a meditation centre. **www.auroville.org**

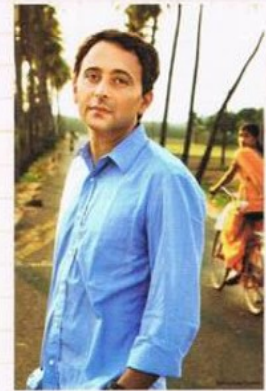
■ Book a heritage walk with **INTACH**, the NGO responsible for much of the restoration work in Pondicherry's 18th-century French Quarter, to hear the stories behind the area's most historic buildings. **62 rue Aurobindo (00 91 413 222 5991; www.intachpondicherry.org)**

CHILL

After a couple of days exploring the town, retreat to **Dune Ecovillage & Spa**, a French-run hotel spread over 35 acres of landscaped wilderness, 15km north along the Bay of Bengal. The vibe is hippy-chic (Marianne Faithfull recently checked in), and there's an excellent Ayurvedic spa and yoga centre. **Pudhukuppam, Keelputhupet (00 91 413 324 4040; www.thedunehotel.com). Doubles from about £65**



Clockwise from above: the Seafood Bar at Dune Ecovillage & Spa; a display at Play Clan; the bathroom of Gramam House at Dune; ox herders on the beach; Hotel de L'Orient; Dune's Art Deco room; a European-style dish at La Maison Rose



My Pondicherry

Akash Kapur AUTHOR

'For a small town, Pondicherry is wonderfully cosmopolitan. There's south Indian culture of course, and the French colonial presence. Then there's the Sri Aurobindo Ashram' [\[www.sriaurobindoashram.org\]](http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org)

and the township of **Auroville**, which have been drawing people from around the world for decades. These influences have given the place a truly international feel. **Pondicherry's Old Town** is unique in India; you come across whole colonial-era streetscapes that have been brilliantly preserved. Wander down rue Dumas and Labourdonnais and you'll find wide, tree-lined boulevards and French villas painted in pastel shades. A definitive Pondicherry experience is a walk along the seafront promenade in the evening when the whole town comes out for a stroll. I also love the **Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper factory** [www.sriaurobindopaper.com] and **Cottage Restaurant** [00 91 413 223 9357], a Zen-like little space that serves the most delicious dosas and Indian sweets.

Akash Kapur's book 'India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India' (Riverhead Books, £17) is out now

