

Discovering Tenkasi District's Captivating Tourism Attractions

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Abstract

This article endeavors to expound upon the tourism potential of Tenkasi District, situated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India, which also serves as the district headquarters. Nestled amidst the scenic foothills of the Western Ghats, Tenkasi district unfolds against a backdrop of breathtaking natural beauty. Governed by the venerable Pandiya dynasty, a historical lineage that stands as one of the oldest kingdoms in the region, Tenkasi boasts a rich cultural and historical heritage.

Keywords: Kas ivishwanathar temple, courtallam, Pandiya kingdom, chittaru, Tenkasi,

Introduction

In epochs long past, Courtallam, an integral part of Tenkasi District, garnered widespread acclaim, extending its reputation to the illustrious Parakiramapandian Kingdom. The historical resonance of the region is exemplified by the Kasivishwanathar Temple, a revered edifice constructed in the year 1467 AD by Parakiramapandian. This temple, a testament to Tenkasi's profound heritage, stands as an iconic landmark that transcends time. Functioning as the ultimate capital of the Pandya dynasty, the Kasivishwanathar Temple is strategically positioned on the tranquil banks of the Chittraru pond, enhancing its allure. Beyond its architectural magnificence, this temple encapsulates the essence of Tenkasi's cultural and historical legacy, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in a journey through time. The tourism potential of Tenkasi District is not merely confined to its historical monuments; the entire region, adorned with the lush landscapes of the Western Ghats, beckons travelers seeking respite in nature's embrace. As one explores Tenkasi, the interplay of history, culture, and natural beauty unfolds, creating an immersive experience that resonates with the essence of this enchanting district in Tamil Nadu.

Kasi Viswanathar Temple Tenkasi

The Kasi Viswanathar Temple in Tenkasi stands as an eminent testament to architectural grandeur, particularly renowned for its majestic gopuram, ranking as the second largest in Tamil Nadu. This sacred abode, also identified as the Ulagamman Temple, is a revered site where Lord Shiva is worshipped in the form of a Swayambhu Murthi. The etymology of the temple's name, Tenkasi, translates poetically to "*Kasi of the South*," underscoring its spiritual significance. Situated in the Tenkasi district, the Kasi Viswanathar Temple commands attention as a prominent attraction. Its origins trace back to the 15th century when the sagacious Pandya king Parakrama Pandian, driven by devout fervor, undertook the construction of this sacred edifice.

The towering structure of the temple claims the distinction of being the second tallest in Tamil Nadu, yielding only to the Srirangam temple. Mythological lore weaves through the tapestry of the temple's history, suggesting that revered sages such as Narada, Agasthya, Mrugandu, Indira, Vali, and Nandhi found homage within its sanctum. The impetus for the temple's creation stemmed from King Parakrama Pandian's ardent desire to daily visit Lord Viswanathar of Kasi (Varanasi). In a divine

revelation within his dream, the lord guided the king to a nearby location. Following a procession of ants, the king uncovered a Shiva Lingam and Nandi. In homage, he erected a temple and established the town of Tenkasi. After six years of unwavering dedication, King Parakrama Pandian, alongside his brother Sadaya Varman Kulasekara Pandian, successfully completed the construction of the main tower.

The chronicles of the temple are meticulously etched in stone inscriptions, providing a historical narrative that transcends time. While nuances exist in historical records regarding the exact period of King Parakrama Pandian's rule, consensus points towards the 15th century. His reign, encompassing the southern precincts of Madurai, including Tenkasi, left an indelible mark on the temple's legacy. Adorned with exquisite carvings, the temple finds its place among the 275 Paadal Petra Sthalams dedicated to Lord Shiva. Devotees converge at this hallowed site to offer worship to Lord Shiva and his divine consort Ulagamman. The temple, in the spiritual context, stands as an equivalent to the venerated abode in Varanasi. Beyond its religious significance, the Kasi Viswanathar Temple serves as a gateway to the renowned Courtallam waterfalls and the verdant landscapes of Kerala. In its sanctified precincts, the past converges with the present, inviting pilgrims and aficionados alike to partake in the spiritual journey embedded within the sacred walls of Tenkasi.

Courtallam

Located amidst the majestic Western Ghats, Courtallam is renowned for its breathtaking surroundings. The idyllic hills, commanding the landscape, effortlessly merge with the enigmatic mist of Agasthiarmalai, a mountain christened after a venerable sage who left an indelible mark on Tamil literature and is believed to have inhabited this very region. Situated at proximity of 5 km, the nearest towns to Courtallam are Shenkottai and Tenkasi, enhancing accessibility for travelers seeking the allure of this scenic gem. For those opting for air travel, Tuticorin Airport (TCR) stands as the nearest aviation hub, positioned at a distance of 90 km from the enchanting Courtallam. This harmonious blend of natural beauty and cultural significance makes Courtallam an exquisite destination that beckons both nature enthusiasts and cultural aficionados alike. As for railway access, the closest station is Tenkasi, just 5 km away. Courtallam is renowned for its nine waterfalls

- ✚ Courtallam, a region renowned for its natural beauty, boasts an array of captivating waterfalls, each with its unique charm and features.
- ✚ *Peraruvi (Main Falls)*: Peraruvi, the grandeur of Courtallam, proudly stands as the largest waterfall in the area, reaching an impressive height of approximately 60 meters. The cascading water encounters the Pongumakadal, a 19-meter deep crater, resulting in a distinctive and safer bathing experience, thanks to the reduced impact.
- ✚ *Chittraruvi (Small Falls)*: Chittraruvi, known for its delicate water flow, offers separate bathing areas for both men and women. Leading to other enchanting waterfalls such as Shenbagadevi and Thenaruvi, this cascade also unveils the beauty of a herbal farm.
- ✚ *Shenbagadevi Falls*: Shenbagadevi Falls is a picturesque sight where water gracefully flows through Shenbaga (*Michaelia champak*) trees. Adjacent to this natural marvel, a temple devoted to Shenbagadevi Amman stands as a testament to the cultural significance of the region.
- ✚ *Thenaruvi (Honey Falls)*: Located approximately 3 km away, Thenaruvi, or Honey Falls, tumbles between two imposing stones, reaching a height of 40 meters. In areas devoid of water, keen observers may catch a glimpse of large honeycombs, adding a touch of sweetness to the natural spectacle.
- ✚ *Aintharuvi (Five Falls)*: Aintharuvi, a beloved choice among visitors, offers the delight of five separate cascades, creating an inviting and immersive bathing experience for those seeking the therapeutic embrace of nature.
- ✚ *Pazhathotta Aruvi (VIP Falls)*: Also known as the 'VIP Falls,' Pazhathotta Aruvi gracefully descends from the orchard above, infusing a touch of exclusivity to the natural landscape.

- ✚ *Pazhaya Courtalla Aruvi (Old Courtallam Falls)*: Once descending into a valley between two rocks, Pazhaya Courtalla Aruvi underwent a transformation when the valley was closed off and rocks were broken to alter the water's course. This alteration aimed to facilitate bathing and was later reopened to the delight of visitors.
- ✚ *Puli Aruvi (Tiger Falls)*: The artificial wonder of Puli Aruvi features a moderate water flow, collecting in a serene lake and serving the dual purpose of irrigation. Occasionally, this location becomes a watering hole for majestic tigers, adding an element of excitement to the natural surroundings.
- ✚ *Government Horticulture Park Cascade*: Within the Government Horticulture Park, situated above Five Falls, a petite cascade graces the landscape. Unfortunately, this natural gem is restricted from public access, preserving its pristine allure. While Main Falls, Five Falls, and Old Courtallam Falls are easily accessible by road, the trekking enthusiasts can explore the hidden gems of Shenbaga Devi Falls and Honey Falls nestled on the mountain slopes, adding an adventurous touch to the waterfall expedition. Courtallam truly stands as a testament to the awe-inspiring beauty that nature graciously bestows upon us.

Places to visit

- ❖ Therkumalai Estate will be reached from Honey falls in an hour, which is 2000 ft above mean sea level.
- ❖ Boat Houses near the Five Falls and Old Kutralam Falls.
- ❖ Snake Park near Main Falls
- ❖ Aquarium near to the Main Falls.
- ❖ Children's Park.

Nearby Tourist Places

Tenkasi is a town located in the foothills of the Western Ghats near the Courtallam Waterfalls, close to the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border in Tirunelveli District. The Puliaruvi Falls is near the inter-state border in Kerala.

Religious

Courtallam is not merely renowned for its cascading waterfalls; its temples, too, draw the attention of visitors. Among these, the Chitra Sabha holds particular prominence, standing as one of the five Sabhas featuring Nataraja, where Shiva is revered in the dancing posture as the principal deity. Approximately a century ago, the paintings within the Chitra Sabha underwent a comprehensive renovation, restoring their artistic allure. The other Sabhas include the Rathna Sabha at Thiruvallangadu, the Kanaka Sabha at Chidambaram, the Velli Sabha at Madurai, and the Thamira Sabha at Tirunelveli.

The temple positioned at the foothills is conch-shaped, a configuration endowed with special significance in Hindu tradition. In his poetic work "*Kutraala Kuravanji*," the esteemed Tamil poet Thirukudarasappa Kavirayar eloquently sang about the exquisite beauty of Courtallam. His verses were composed while standing atop its highest point, which reaches an elevation of 1565 meters. Reiterating, the temple situated at the base of the hill is shaped like a conch, symbolizing its profound significance within Hindu traditions.

Nearby Temples

- ❖ Thiru Kutralanadhar Kovil near Main falls. During the Thamizh month of Chithirai a tenday festival is celebrated which ends on Pournami (Full Moon Day) in the special prayers.
- ❖ Thirumalai Kovil in Panpozli, 8 km from Courtallam.
- ❖ Kumaran Kovil in Ilanji, 1 km from Courtallam.
- ❖ Kasivishuwanathar Kovil in Tenkasi, 6 km from Courtallam.
- ❖ Sankaranainar Kovil in Sankarankovil, 47 km from Courtallam
- ❖ Dhakshinamoorthy Kovil at Puliyarai, 12 km from Kutralam.

- ❖ Papanasam Ulagaambihai Kovil in Papanasam, 35 km from Kutaralam.
- ❖ Ariyankavu Iyappan Kovil in Kerala, 35 km from Kutaralam.

Sankarankovil

The Sankara Narayanar Kovil, situated approximately 50 kilometers from Tirunelveli or approximately 75 kilometers from Madurai, boasts substantial religious and tourist significance. Commonly known as Sankarankovil, this locale derives its nomenclature from the prominent temple it houses, standing as the second-largest town in Tenkasi District. The temple complex, dedicated to Sankara Narayana, attracts devout pilgrims and curious tourists alike. Its architectural grandeur and spiritual ambiance make it a notable landmark in the region. Sankarankovil's rich cultural and historical heritage further contribute to its appeal, offering visitors a unique blend of religious reverence and scenic beauty. As one explores the town, the vibrant local markets and traditional establishments add a touch of authenticity to the overall experience.

The pilgrimage to Sankara Narayanar Kovil not only fulfills spiritual aspirations but also provides an opportunity to immerse oneself in the cultural tapestry of the region. In addition to its religious eminence, Sankarankovil serves as a gateway to explore the natural wonders and historical sites that abound in the surrounding areas. The town's strategic location makes it a convenient base for travelers seeking to delve into the diverse attractions that Tenkasi District and its environs have to offer. The Sankara Narayanar Kovil in Sankarankovil stands as a testament to the rich cultural and religious heritage of the region. Whether one is drawn by spiritual pursuits or a desire to explore historical and natural wonders, this destination promises a fulfilling and enriching experience.

History of the temple

In the early 11th century, the region was under the governance of UgraPandiyar, a notable ruler who left an indelible mark by commissioning the construction of a temple that would come to symbolize the embodiment of the earth itself—the lingam within its sanctum. Ugra Pandiyar, known for his deep devotion, undertook a daily ritual of traveling to Madurai on the back of an elephant to pay homage to Lord Somasundarar and Meenakshi.

One fateful day during these devotional journeys, an unexpected incident occurred. Ugra Pandiyar's elephant, a faithful companion in his religious pursuits, inadvertently dug a pit with its trunk, causing it to stumble and roll over on the ground. Despite the king's attempts, the elephant adamantly refused to move any further, signaling an unusual interruption in the customary routine. Manikreevan, a vigilant watchman in the king's service, swiftly brought to Ugra Pandiyar's attention the presence of a Siva lingam adorned with a coiled cobra in the nearby Punnai forest. Acting on this revelation, the king hastened to the location. To the astonishment of all present, an oracle resonated, conveying a divine directive.

The oracle instructed Ugra Pandiyar to construct a temple dedicated to the worship of the discovered lingam, emphasizing unwavering devotion. Undeterred by the unexpected turn of events, UgraPandiyar, guided by the divine oracle, embraced his duty wholeheartedly. He initiated the construction of a temple, ensuring that every detail reflected his profound commitment to Lord Siva. The temple, thus erected, stood as a testament to the king's fidelity and fulfilled his sacred obligation to worship the lingam that emerged unexpectedly in the Punnai forest. This sacred place, with its lingam as the earthly embodiment, became a symbol of devotion and reverence in the legacy of Ugra Pandiyar's reign.

Festivals

Festivals are commemorated annually at this temple with great grandeur. The Adi Thapasu festival, observed during the Tamil month of Adi (July-August), holds significant importance. This celebration draws the participation of thousands of pilgrims, devotees, and tourists alike. Additionally, the Chitrapournami festival, occurring in April-May, and Theppam festival in the Tamil month of Thai (January-February) also garner substantial attendance from the public. The vibrant festivities not only

contribute to the spiritual fervor of the temple but also captivate a diverse audience seeking cultural and religious experiences.

Panpozhil Thirumalai Kumaraswamy Temple

Perched atop a hillock in Panpozhil, on the northwestern fringes of Tenkasi - Courtallam, stands an illustrious temple venerating Lord Muruga, also known as Thirumalai Kumaraswamy, with a history spanning over four centuries. Located 72 kilometers from Tirunelveli, this temple assumes paramount significance within the region. Notably, it serves as a sacred site where Saint Arunagirinathar, with devotion coursing through his veins, composed hymns extolling the glory of Lord Muruga. This revered abode annually witnesses a plethora of festivities, drawing a substantial congregation of devotees. The temple's allure is not confined to the local populace alone; pilgrims from neighboring states traverse considerable distances to pay homage to this distinguished sanctuary. The echoes of spirituality resonate throughout the vicinity, making it a cherished destination for seekers of divine grace and cultural enthusiasts alike.

Ilanji

Ilanji, situated on the northern side of Tenkasi, is a charming village known for its breathtaking natural beauty. One of its notable attractions is a magnificent five-hundred-year-old Temple devoted to Lord Muruga. This architectural marvel was constructed by King Adiveerarama Pandiyan and has been immortalized in the verses of Saint Arunagiri Nathar. Not only does this temple captivate the locals, but it also draws tourists from other states, making it a popular destination.

Ayikudi

Ayikudi, situated on the route to Shencottah and located 59 kilometers from Tirunelveli by road, is a quaint village. The renowned Lord Muruga Temple in Ayikudi attracts numerous Hindu pilgrims, known for its exquisite architectural marvels. Notably, this village has gained significant importance due to its provision of rehabilitation services for the disabled through a charitable organization called Amar Seva Sangh.

Sambavarvadakarai

Sambavarvadakarai, a serene village located 54 kilometers from Tirunelveli, is home to a grand temple dedicated to Lord Siva and Parvathi. This temple holds immense significance and attracts a large number of devotees and tourists on a regular basis. The Srimoolanathaswami Temple Chithirai Pouranami festival, celebrated here, is a well-known religious event in the region. Numerous tourists make it a point to visit this temple annually.

Pottalpuður Dargha

Pottalpuður holds significant importance in the Tirunelveli area. The main attraction of this place is the oldest Dargha, which was constructed in 1670. Tourists are captivated by the various appealing aspects of this place. It is a truly secular site that attracts not only Muslims but also Hindus, Christians, and followers of other religions. The Dargha has been built in the style of a Hindu Temple. During the Kanthuri festival, pilgrims offer their prayers and make offerings to the Dargha in large numbers, showing great reverence. The customs and rituals followed here are similar to those of Hindus, with the labbais acting as priests. Devotees are given holy ash, prepared from various sources such as tamarind bark, ghee, and flowers called nersa. People from all walks of life offer sheep, sweets, fruits, and flowers to Andavar, and sheep were traditionally sacrificed before Him, similar to the practice with local Amman deities. However, the government has intervened and now people offer fruits instead of fowl and sheep for worship. During the Kanthuri festivals, sandal paste is prepared on a large scale and sent to the Hindu village of Ravanamudram, from where it is brought back to the Dargha with great pomp. This paste is then distributed to the awaiting crowd without any discrimination based on caste, creed, or religion. This Dargha stands as a shining example of communal harmony and secularism, and it is considered as pious and sacred as the Nagore Dargha.

Shenkottai

Shenkottah, previously a part of Kerala State, underwent a linguistic reorganization in 1956. Located 63 kilometers away from Tirunelveli, this town possesses the distinctive characteristics of a typical Kerala city. In addition to Tamil and English, the residents of Shenkottah also speak Malayalam. With its picturesque natural surroundings, the town boasts numerous temples, a well-maintained park, and modern farms. The abundance of coconut and mango trees has earned Shenkottah the title of the "Garden City" of Tirunelveli district. The festivals held at the Sakthi (Devi Nithyakalyani Amman) Temple attract a large number of visitors each year.

Melagaram

Melagaram, located merely three kilometers from Tenkasi en route to Courtallam, holds significant tourism value as it is the birthplace of the renowned Tamil Poet Thirikooda Rasappa Kavirayar, author of the Kutrala Kuravanji. This tranquil village serves as an excellent destination for rejuvenation and leisure.

Achanpudur

Achanpudur, situated in the western region of Shencottah, is a quaint village that has gained popularity primarily because of the Lord Ayyappa Temple. Every year, during the months of November, December, and January, numerous devotees of Ayyappa Swami flock to this temple as an essential component of their sacred journey to Sabarimalai Lord Ayyappa Temple. The village's natural beauty further enhances the spiritual joy experienced by the people at Achanpudur.

Conclusion

Tenkasi District stands as a prominent jewel among the coveted tourist destinations in Tamil Nadu, offering a picturesque landscape nestled at the foothills of the Western Ghats. The enchanting Agasthiyar Hill, adorned with natural hills in Kourtalam, captivates visitors with its verdant allure resembling a blanket of green mist. Finding solace in the cascading waterfalls not only soothes the mind but also rejuvenates the body. Situated just 5 km away, the majestic Red Fort overlooks the Gundar Reservoir, presenting a sight as breathtaking as the expansive sea. King Parakrama Pandya, inspired by a divine dream where Lord Shiva himself beckoned, envisioned the construction of a temple in the likeness of Kashi in Varanasi. Consequently, the Goddess Sametha Kashiviswanathar temple was erected in this region, christening it as Tenkasi.

The wind whispering through the temple's towering gates imparts a sense of elevation to its visitors. A mere 15 km away lies the Tirumala Kumaraswamy Temple atop the scenic Panbozhi hill. Ascending its 625 steps, tourists are greeted by lush green hills, creating a visual spectacle. Resonating with the Kerala temple architecture is the Ayikudi Balasubramani Swamy Temple, surrounded by the Puliyarai Sadasivamurthy Temple, Achanputur, Sambavarvadakarai, Sundarapandiyapuram, and the Sankaranayanar Temple in Sankarankoil, located 45 km from Tenkasi. The Aadithapasu festival celebrated here is renowned across the region. Tenkasi becomes a melting pot of diverse cultures during the Pottalputur Dargah festival, attracting general tourists as well as participants from the Ganduri festival. Notably, it stands as the singular festival in South Tamil Nadu that transcends barriers of caste, creed, and ethnicity. The reservoirs and rivers, resembling vast seas, add another layer of allure to the myriad attractions, contributing significantly to Tenkasi's appeal as a tourist haven.

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