

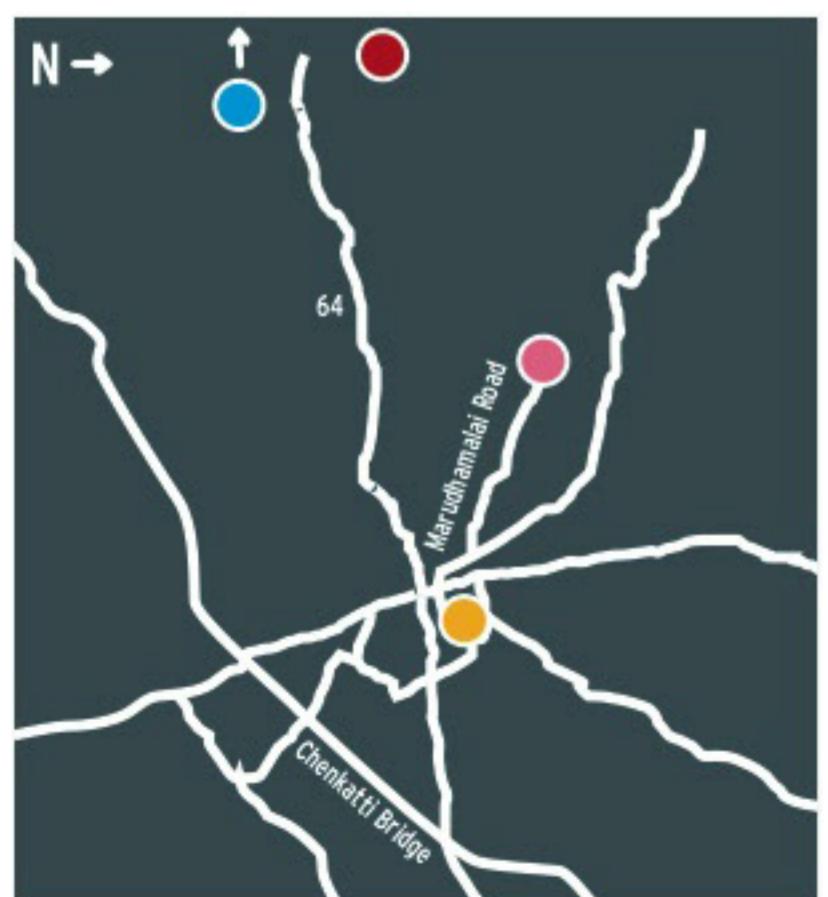


Coimbatore

While it's known as the Manchester of South India, Tamil Nadu's second largest city is more than just an industrial hub.

BY ISABEL PUTINJA

With over 100 mills in operation spinning India's finest fabrics, the city's reputation as an important textile centre is undisputed. But beyond being a commercial heart, Coimbatore's location on the edge of the Western Ghats mountain range and Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, makes it the perfect base for nature lovers to explore this diverse landscape, as well as the quaint, nearby hill stations of Ooty and Coonoor.



1 Material matters

Visit Cross Cut Road in the neighbourhood of Gandhipuram and you'll be in no doubt that you're in **South India's biggest textile centre**. The 1.2km stretch from Gandhipuram Junction to North Coimbatore Flyover is chock-a-block with *sari* and jewellery shops and department stores. Here, you'll find some of the finest fabrics in India and stunning *saris* made of luscious silk and high-quality cotton.

2 Fit for the gods

Perched on the top of a lush hillock just 15km away from the city is the 12th-century **Marudhamalai**

Murugan Temple. One of the most important temples dedicated to the Hindu god Murugan, it's built in typical South Indian Dravidian style with pyramid-shaped towers. Thousands of pilgrims visit year-round, climbing the 1,050 steps to this sacred site.



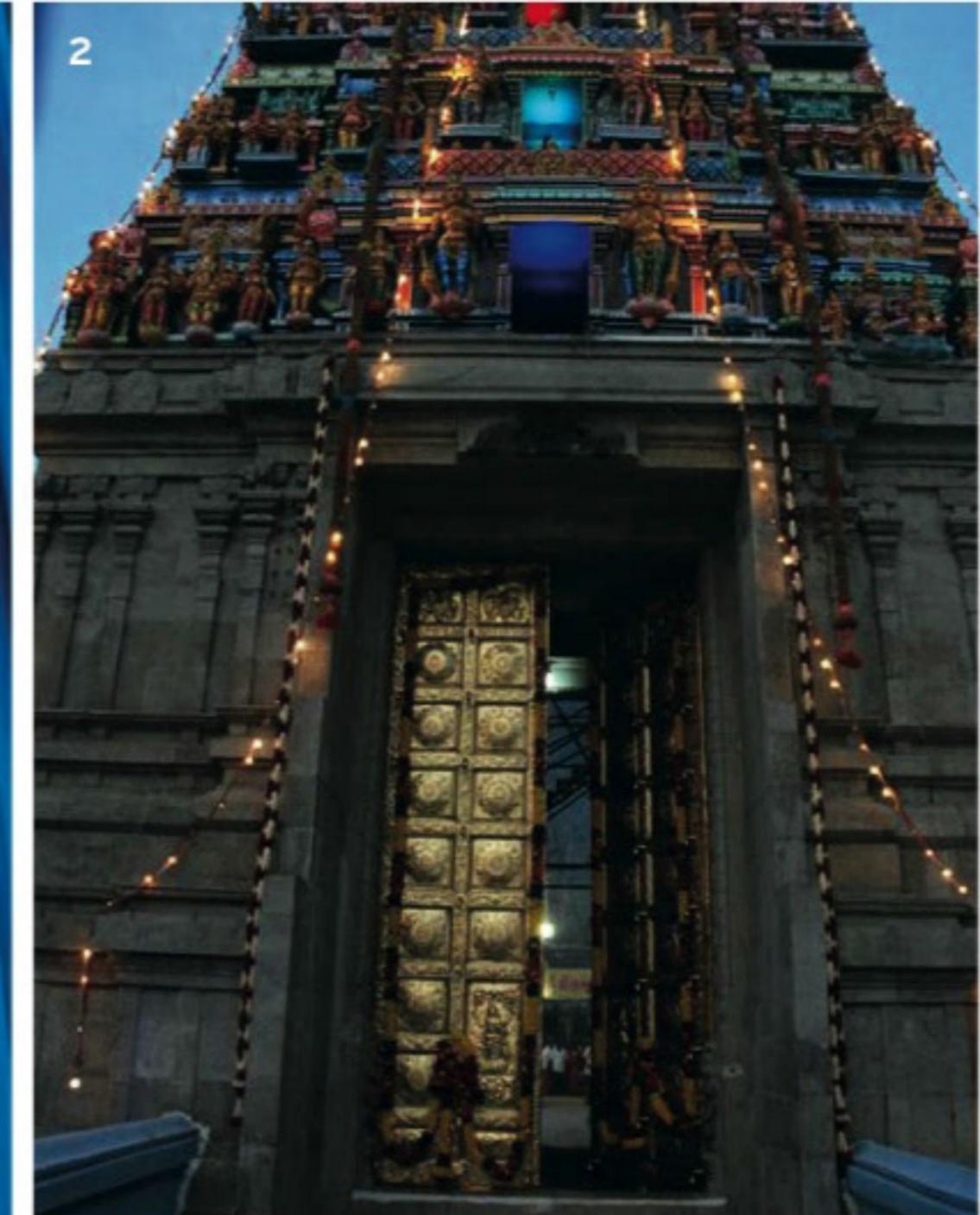
3 Water break

The **Kovai Kutralam waterfalls** in Siruvani are a popular natural attraction that's just under an hour's drive from the city, without traffic. These spectacular falls are in the heart of Boluvampatti Forest Reserve, a protected area accessible via a one kilometre-long trail that winds through dense forest with stunning views of the surrounding hills along the way. A popular bathing spot, this is also the site of a dam and reservoir, which were built to supply the city with drinking water.

4 Check out

Located on the fringe of the Nilgiri

GETTY IMAGES: ISHA YOGA CENTER; MARUDHAMALAI MURUGANTE AND ERIGA



RIDE THE NILGIRI MOUNTAIN RAILWAY

Nestled in the nearby Nilgiri Mountains, about 100km from Coimbatore, is Ooty, a scenic hill station which was a favourite summer retreat of the British. At over 2,000m above sea level, Ooty enjoys a refreshingly cool climate, making it a very popular holiday destination with Indian tourists who come here and nearby Coonoor to escape the heat.

It's a charming colonial town of picturesque bungalows, botanical gardens and lakes. Head to the market for locally handmade chocolate, tea, honey and spices. At the many tea plantations, visitors learn how tea is processed and can sample the different types of tea produced here.

To reach these two hilltop towns, take the Nilgiri Mountain Railway. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the 46km railway stretch offers one of the most unique train journeys in India. Construction began in 1897 and was completed in 1908. The locomotive is steam-powered - it gets filled with water at every stop - and runs on a one-metre gauge 'toothed' single-track.

The train's cog wheels interconnect with the rack rail to make the steep climb. It commences its ascent in Mettupalayam, 35km north of Coimbatore, where it steadily climbs from 326m to an altitude of 2,203m up to Ooty, passing Coonoor on the way. The breathtakingly scenic journey runs through pretty tea plantations, dense forests, and waterfalls, passing over many viaducts and through a dozen tunnels along the way.



SilkAir flies four times weekly between Singapore and Coimbatore