



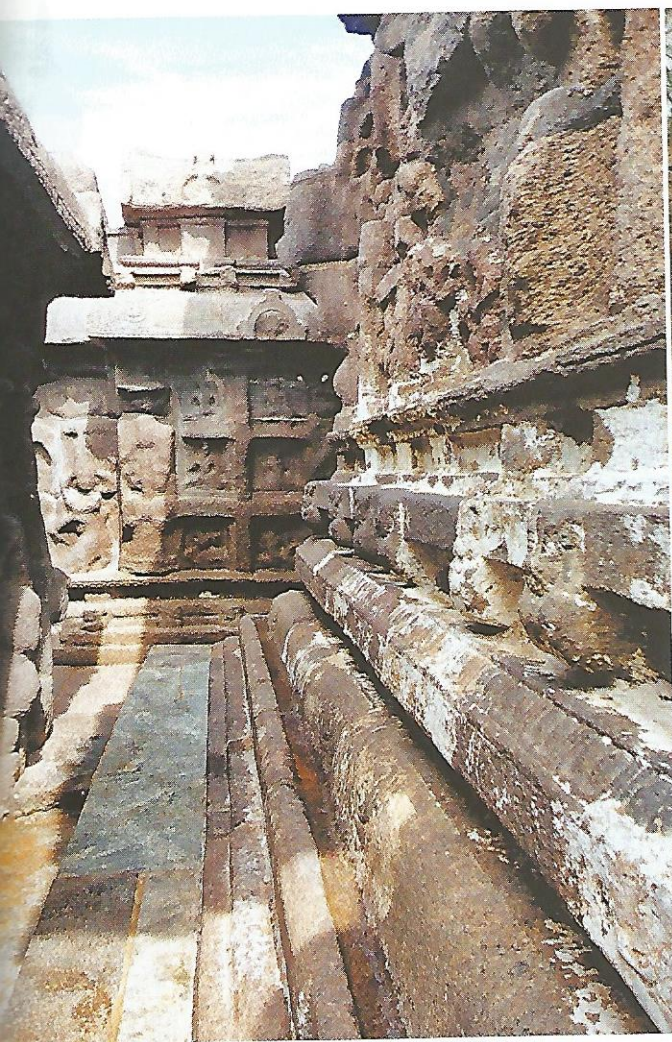
# Rock SONG

The magnificent stone monuments of Mahabalipuram resonate with stories of a bygone era

❖ 📷 Ramya Srinivasan

It's still the early hours; the coastal city of Chennai is waking up to bustling traffic and the aroma of delicious steaming *idli*. After a heavy downpour the previous day, the clouds have cleared out, paving the way for a beautiful sunny morning. This is a city known for many things—a booming IT corridor, a boisterous movie industry and a vibrant cultural scene. But, most of all, the two places that are integral to the Chennai scene are Marina beach and Mahabalipuram. If your order of the day is 'beach on the rocks,' then Mahabalipuram or Mahabs, as it is fondly called, is the destination of choice.

A legacy of the Pallava dynasty that ruled the southern parts of the country in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with Kancheepuram as their capital, Mahabalipuram is a UNESCO heritage site situated about 60 km from Chennai. 'Mahabali' in Tamil means



Clockwise from above: Corridors connecting the shrines in the Shore Temple; *ratha* in a line starting from Dharmaraja *ratha*; a sculpture of a lion Facing page (clockwise from top left): Intricate carvings on the wall depicting Trivikrama avatar; a *shivalinga* in Trimurti caves; Arjuna's Penance

warrior, and it's believed that Mahabalipuram is named after the illustrious Pallava king Narasimha Varman. He was also called *Mamallan* (wrestler in Tamil), and hence the place is also referred to as Mamallapuram.

Cruising along the smooth East Coast Road we reach Mahabs, and after negotiating through a couple of narrow alleys we reach the counter to collect our entry ticket of ₹ 10. The place has several attractions; the same ticket can be used for all. We start with the monument complex of the *Pancha Ratha* named after the Pandava brothers—Dharmaraja (Yudhishtira), Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula-Sahadeva—and their wife Draupadi. With intricate carvings, the chariot-shaped monolithic structures are a feast for the eyes. It's believed that a gigantic boulder, sloping south to north, was used in the making of the five chariots, with the southernmost Dharmaraja *ratha* being the biggest, and the size of the chariots decreasing as we move northwards. We were shocked to see parents lofting children atop animal structures in the complex for clicking

pictures on their smartphones, with scant regard for their archaeological value. It's sad that there are no guidelines against this.

Coming back to the *ratha*, with a Durga idol and women *dwarapalaka*, the Draupadi *ratha*—a statement in feminism—stands apart from the rest. Next to it is the Arjuna *ratha*, which is a smaller version of the Dharmaraja *ratha* with sculptures of Vishnu on Garuda, Shiva leaning on Nandi and Indra on his elephant Airavatha. The Bhima *ratha* has a rectangular base and beautiful horse-shoe shaped *chaitya* windows. The Dharmaraja *ratha*, the most splendid of the chariots, sits on a square base with tastefully carved pavilions. The outer walls are adorned with idols of Lord Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva and Murugan. The *Ardhanareeswara* sculpture, demonstrating the union of valour and vulnerability, is a standout work on this *ratha*. In a separate panel, there is also the sculpture of King Narasimha Varman, who built these shrines. Stationed separately from the rest is the Nakula-Sahadeva *ratha*, the

smallest of the lot. The roofs of the chariots are equally distinct. While the roof of the Draupadi *ratha* resembles a thatched hut, the roof of Bhima *ratha* looks like a covered cart; the Arjuna and Dharmaraja *ratha*, meanwhile, are crowned with pyramidal rooftops.

By the time we wrap up the *Pancha Rathas* and head towards Arjuna's Penance and other caves, it is impossible not to be astounded by the marvel of this heritage monument and the cultural and architectural contribution of the Pallava kings. The story goes that the Pallava dynasty traces its origin to the child born to Guru Drona's son Ashwathama and a

Naga princess. The Pallavas also feature significantly in ancient Tamil literature; their rivalry with the Chalukyas features prominently in Tamil author Kalki Krishnamoorthy's *Sivagamiyin Sabadham*.

Arjuna's Penance, one of the largest bas-reliefs in the world, has a multitude of stories and sub-stories featured on the huge rock-canvas. As it is difficult to identify the figures, it would be ideal to hire a guide. We, for one, were expecting a handsome Arjuna carrying his bow and arrow, but were instead pointed to a bearded sage standing on one foot, praying to Lord Shiva for *Paashupathastra*. With a noticeable cleft in the middle of

It is a complete treat to the senses with the rhythm of the bluish white waves lashing against the rocks in the background, adding to the charm of the imposing temple towers



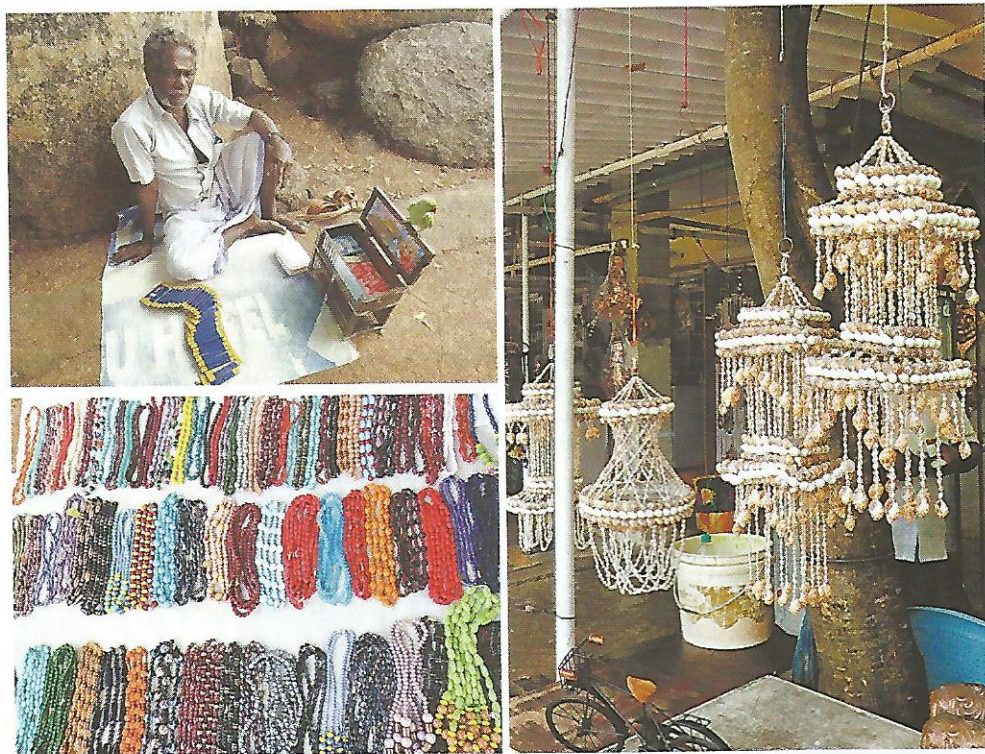
The Shore Temple is the only surviving structure of 'The Place of Seven Pagodas'

the rock, signifying the flow of Ganga through the crevice, no wonder that the bas-relief is also referred to as the 'Descent of Ganga'. Some believe that the sculptures refer to the penance of Bhagiratha, Rama's ancestor, who prayed to Lord Shiva to allow Ganga to descend to earth. There is a cistern below the canvas, suggesting that water once actually flowed through this gap. On the same boulder, there is also a carving of Bhadri ashram, where the Pandavas were believed to have stayed during their exile. What brought a smile on my face was the sculpture of a cat

in meditation, in a pose similar to that of Arjuna—with rats playing around it—suggestive of Duryodhana's derision of the Pandavas. It is amazing how a single boulder can be subjected to different interpretations and narrations. In the nearby Krishna *Mandapa*, besides the main sculpture of Krishna lifting the Govardhan mountain, there are other endearing everyday details such as a couple in love and a cow affectionately licking its calf.

Our feet graze the stony surface as we climb up to view Krishna's Butterball, a massive boulder that seems to defy the laws of gravity with just the tip grazing





Clockwise from top left: A parrot astrologer waiting for fortune seekers; a shell souvenir shop; colourful, stringed beads for sale; Facing page: Entrance to Trimurti caves

Mahabalipuram is perfect for a full day out, at the end of which you can either choose to laze around on the beach or play in the waters. Although this is a temple hub, you are not required to remove footwear anywhere except in the sanctum sanctorum

the surface. In fact, it's so precariously perched that it looks like it could roll down the slope any moment. This is an important photo shoot spot for most tourists and you will be lucky if you manage to snatch a single second alone here!

Further down is the Trimurthi cave with separate sanctums for Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It has to be stated here that this is one of those rare shrines to Brahma, who is generally not worshipped. The nearby Sthala Sayana Perumal temple also has a rare reclining posture of Lord Vishnu, who is depicted resting directly on the land, and not on Adishesha, the serpent.

Our final stop is the Shore Temple, a marked shift from the earthen hues of black, brown and grey that defined the

landscape so far. The Shore Temple offers an expansive green lawn to park your family for a small picnic.

It is a complete treat to the senses with the rhythm of the bluish white waves lashing against the rocks in the background, adding to the charm of the imposing temple towers. Mamallapuram was originally called 'The Place of Seven Pagodas' as it housed seven temples. Of these, only the Shore Temple, built by Narasimha Varman II, also called Rajasimha, survives. The row of Nandi bulls encrusted on the long temple wall looks spectacular. There are three shrines here, two dedicated to Lord Shiva and the third to Vishnu, on the three sides of the temple. While walking through the narrow corridors connecting the shrines we spot many idols engraved on the sides.



## factfile

### Getting There

- **By air:** Meenambakkam airport in Chennai is 58 km away.
- **By rail:** The closest railhead, Chennai Central Station, is 55 km away.
- **By road:** The roads leading to Chennai are in good condition and the East Coast Road that leads to Mahabalipuram is particularly a pleasure to drive on. Bus facilities are also frequent.

### Best Time to Visit

You can expect the best weather from November to mid-February. The classical dance festival in January is celebrated with grand fervour and festivities.

### Accommodation

- **Hotel Mamallaa Heritage;** Email: [info@hotelmamallaheritage.com](mailto:info@hotelmamallaheritage.com); Tel: 044-27442060
- **Hotel Sea Breeze;** Email: [seabreezehotel@hotmail.com](mailto:seabreezehotel@hotmail.com); Tel: 044-27443035

### Tips

Book a beach resort and take your time to enjoy the place. The East Coast Road, which stretches along the Bay of Bengal, is also home to several other tourist attractions including amusement parks (VGP Universal Kingdom and MGM Dizze World), Mayajal (movie complex and other entertainment activities such as bowling), Crocodile Park, Go Karting tracks and Muttukadu Boat House.

Mahabalipuram is perfect for a full day out, at the end of which you can either choose to laze around on the beach or play in the waters; there are changing rooms nearby. If you are a connoisseur of classical dance, it's the place to flock to during Pongal, when scintillating classical dance performances are staged annually against the magnificent backdrop of the Pallava rock sculptures.

In the by-lanes, you find vendors selling shell trinkets and idols carved in stone. Foretellers are a common sight. There are many restaurants around the place where you can savour local food. Other than the typical vegetarian fare and street food, there are also many seafood options, with Moonrakers being a popular hangout. As the sultry town of Chennai is infamous for its scorching heat, it is best to avoid it during the summer months. Although this is a temple hub, you are not required to remove footwear anywhere except in the sanctum sanctorum. Even that appeared to be a voluntary act of devotees; there are no guidelines insisting on it. This, perhaps, is the best indication that Mahabalipuram is predominantly perceived as an architectural wonder than a temple complex. ✨