

From Auroville to Hampi***A 24-Day Traverse of South India's Living Heritage*****Part I: Puducherry to Thiruvananthapuram****By****Brig AP Singh****avepee99@yahoo.com****Abstract**

The first leg of the HKC expedition, sponsored by the Ocean Philanthropic Centre (OPC), traces a sweeping arc through the spiritual and cultural heartland of South India. Over nine days and roughly 2,000 kilometres, the team journeyed from the utopian vision of Auroville and the meditative heights of Tiruvannamalai to the cosmic grandeur of Chidambaram's Nataraja, the engineering marvel of Thanjavur's Brihadeeswara Temple, and the sacred confluences of Rameswaram and Kanyakumari. The route also encompassed Asia's oldest surviving manuscript library, the world's largest active religious complex at Srirangam, and the legendary wealth of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. Interwoven with these monuments of stone and spirit were encounters with frontier marine biology research at Annamalai University and with dedicated custodians of ancient manuscripts and Vedic scholarship. A mixed team of three Europeans—encountering India for the first time—alongside three Indians brought a uniquely layered perspective to every discovery, revealing facets of a living civilisation that continues to astonish even those who call it home.

“India's ancient wisdom and modern aspirations exist not in conflict, but in constant, creative conversation.”

Twenty-four days. Roughly 4,000 kilometres on open roads. The vibrant, layered heartland of southern India. What began as a structured expedition evolved into something far richer—a living encounter with ancient temples, cutting-edge research centres, visionary NGOs, and scholars who have devoted their lives to preserving India's civilizational inheritance. The journey was made doubly vivid by the presence of European friends—

Heidi, Patrick, Eric, Jean Charles, and Svanhilde—experiencing India for the very first time. Their astonishment at what Indians take for granted became a lens that sharpened our own perception.

The expedition was sponsored by the Ocean Philanthropic Centre (OPC), a collective of professionals and intellectuals inspired by India's timeless ethos, with Health, Knowledge, and Culture (HKC) as its guiding pillars. Part I covers Days 1 through 9, tracing the route from Puducherry south to Kanyakumari and back up to Thiruvananthapuram.

Day 1 — Auroville: Seeds of a New Dawn

The adventure began on 4 April 2025, as Vikram Naik and I converged at Puducherry Airport and drove to Auroville, the universal township dedicated to human unity. That evening, we met a remarkable trio—Heidi (84), Patrick (81), and Eric (50)—French nationals who had arrived overland from France five decades earlier, hitchhiking into a country that became their life's work. Over wine and Korean food in the forest, they recounted decades spent building the Ashram and Auroville—a founding generation whose stories were themselves a testament to the transformative power of shared vision.



Image: Day 1-Puducherry Airport

Day 2 — Encounters, Exchanges & a Baton Passed

April 5th brought a cascade of encounters. At the Tibetan Pavilion, Kalsang—who had crossed the frozen Himalayan passes from Tibet as a child—brought the exhibits alive with personal memory, a resonant reminder of cultures preserved against all odds. Journalist François Gautier spoke passionately about his Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum of Indian History in Pune, dedicated to rescuing lesser-known episodes from obscurity. That afternoon, the HKC expedition baton was formally exchanged aboard the sailboat ‘Tarak’ at the Pondy Yacht Club, as Jean Charles and Svanhilde arrived from Switzerland and Prasad Rane flew in from Mumbai, completing the core team. The day concluded at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where the serene courtyard around the Samadhi offered a moment of profound stillness.



Image: Day 2-Puducherry Auroville

Day 3 — Tiruvannamalai: Fire, Inquiry & Serendipity

At the base of the sacred Arunachala hill, the team visited Sri Ramana Maharishi’s Ashram and climbed to his meditation cave. By extraordinary chance, they encountered David Godman—a leading authority on the Maharishi’s teachings—who paused to speak at length. Below, the Arunachalesvara Temple, one of the five *Pancha Bhuta Sthalas* representing *Agni* (fire), humbled the group with its 9th-century Chola grandeur, the hill itself revered as a living Shivalingam.



Image: Day 3-Tiruvannamalai_Arunachalesvara Temple

Day 4 — Marine Science, Cosmic Dance & Chola Grandeur

April 7th started at the Centre of Advanced Study in Marine Biology, Annamalai University, Parangipettai—where direct shoreline access gives researchers unparalleled reach into estuaries, mangroves, and coastal waters. Director Dr P Soundarapandian facilitated a lively exchange that underscored both the intellectual vitality of India's scientific community and the urgency of its environmental research.

From science to philosophy: the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram—representing *Akasha* (ether), another of the *Pancha Bhuta Sthalas*—offered a meditation on Shiva's cosmic dance of creation and dissolution. A detour to Darasuram near Kumbakonam revealed the Airavateswara Temple, its 12th-century Chola stone sculptures so exquisite they earned UNESCO World Heritage designation. The day ended before the illuminated Brihadeeswara Temple at Thanjavur: its 208-foot vimana, capped by a monolithic 80-ton granite capstone raised by emperor Rajaraja I in just seven years, remains one of humanity's most staggering feats of engineering.



Image: Day 4-Annamalai University_Interaction



Image: Day 4-Darasuram - Airavateshwar Temple



Image: Day 4-Tanjavur Brihadeeswara Temple



Image: Day 4-Chidambaram_Nataraja Temple1



Image: Day 4-Chidambaram_Nataraja Temple2

Day 5 — Royal Libraries, 1,000 Pillars & Sacred Waters

Thanjavur's Saraswathi Mahal Library—one of Asia's oldest surviving repositories, housing over 49,000 manuscripts since the 16th century—perfectly embodied the HKC mission. At Srirangam, the Ranganathaswamy Temple's Hall of 1,000 Pillars, lined with rearing horses carved in the full fury of Chola ambition, spread across the world's largest active religious complex at 155 acres. Nearby, the Jambukeshwara Temple—the *Pancha Bhuta Sthala* of *Neer* (water)—completed the day's darshan, an underground spring flowing silently beneath its very sanctum.

Image: Day 5-Srirangam_Jambukeshwara Temple



Image: Day 5-Thanjavur_Museum Chola bronze Nataraja



Image: Day 5-Thanjavur_Museum

Day 6 — Vedic Scholarship, Academic Dialogue & Madurai

Shri A Krishnamachari's modest publishing house in Trichy has produced a 46-volume exposition on Vaishnavism and a 16-volume treatise on the Srirangam temple—a monumental private act of cultural preservation. At St Joseph's College (founded in 1844 and the alma mater of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam), the Dean of Mathematics welcomed the group for an interdisciplinary exchange on ancient Indian mathematical traditions. The day ended in Madurai, built around the magnificent Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, where Shaktism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism converge in a single extraordinary sacred space.



Image: Day 6-Srirangam_Krishnamachari



Image: Day 6-Trichy_St Josephs College

Days 7–8 — Island Pilgrimage & India's Southernmost Tip

The drive to Rameswaram—across the iconic Pamban Bridge—brought the team to the Ramanathaswamy Temple: a Jyotirlinga site, a Char Dham destination, and home to the world's longest temple corridor at 3,850 feet, flanked by 1,212 intricately carved pillars. At Kanyakumari, where the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea converge in a single shimmering horizon, the team ferried to the Vivekananda Rock Memorial—the very place of Swami Vivekananda's enlightenment. The adjacent 41-metre Thiruvalluvar statue honours the Tamil poet-philosopher, while a newly inaugurated glass pedestrian bridge between the two rocks offered a quietly poetic symbol of modernity in dialogue with antiquity.



Image: Day 7-Rameshwaram_Temple corridors



Image : Day 8-Kanyakumari



Image: Day 8-Pamban Bridge

Day 9 — The Golden Treasures of Thiruvananthapuram

The leg's culmination was the Padmanabhaswamy Temple—widely considered the world's richest religious institution. With three of its six vaults still sealed, the wealth already catalogued—gold, precious stones, and artefacts accumulated over millennia—represents the largest known collection in recorded history. Entry required traditional dress; our European companions waited outside, a gentle reminder that some layers of India remain selectively permeable. A visit to the Napier Museum, with its 550-piece collection spanning Buddhist sculptures from the 1st century CE, rounded off an extraordinary day.

As Stella departed for Amsterdam and Jyoti joined from Delhi, the expedition's character as a living, ever-shifting community of seekers was once again reaffirmed.



Image: Day 9-Thiruvananthapuram_Padmabhaswamy Temple



Nine days. Three Pancha Bhuta Sthalas. Three UNESCO monuments. Two world-record temples. One of the world's richest institutions. And six travellers—from four countries—learning to see India with fresh eyes.

Part II continues the journey northward: from Kerala's compassion-driven NGOs and Isha Yoga's spiritual innovation, through the royal grandeur of Mysore and the celestial sculpture of Halebidu, the darshan of the Shankaracharya of Sringeri, and the haunting ruins of Hampi—before the final arc up the Konkan coast to Kolhapur, Goa, Pune, and Mumbai.

About the Author

Brigadier AP Singh (Retd) is a veteran from the Corps of Engineers, Indian Army, and a crew member of India's first circumnavigation of the globe aboard the sailboat 'Trishna'. He is the author of *Kashmir: The Land of Rishis* and *Temples of Goa: History, Portuguese*

Persecution and Revival, and has served as Registrar at Indus University. An avid traveller, heritage researcher, and blogger, his writings and photography may be explored at <https://collectingmoments.in>.

