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REPORT
Pondicherry

BIENVENUE EN INDE —*Pondicherry*

Preface

Nestled in a corner of southern India is a town of pétanque and pâtisseries: Pondicherry is home to 7,000 French expats. It's a microcosm of France and India's flourishing business ties but is it ready for major economic growth?

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In the shadow of the twin Gothic-style towers of a church, a cluster of Tamil men play pétanque on a red-earthed field. Just yards away, dozens of locals stroll freely along the seafront road, which is entirely free of vehicles. This is India, but not as we know it: a town where streets are wide and clean, bougainvillea in full bloom hangs low over lime-and-mortar walls and sari-clad women tote baguettes in their shopping baskets.

Almost six decades after the departure of its erstwhile French rulers, Pondicherry (officially renamed Puducherry but rarely referred to as such) retains a strong Gallic flavour. A three-hour drive north of Chennai, the most prominent of France's handful of former colonial outposts in India strongly resembles small-town France with its colonial façades, wide pavements and blue road-name plaques. There are some key differences, mind you, not least the fact that streets are drenched in bright tropical sunshine and dotted with coconut palms and rickshaws.

"It's a place like no other," says Pierre Fournier, French consul general for the region. "It has a very special flavour. It's quiet and dynamic at the same time."

The city has enjoyed a brief spell of popularity in recent months having featured at the start of Ang Lee's Oscar-winning film *Life of Pi*. With a newly opened



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- 01 A Pondicherry policeman directs traffic wearing a French-style uniform, complete with kepi
- 02 Early-morning car-washing session
- 03 Pondicherry's vehicle-free promenade



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domestic airport as well as boutique hotels and restaurants springing up, Pondicherry is poised to become India's next destination for both tourists and entrepreneurs.

Around 7,000 French expatriates have already made Pondicherry their home. Most are Franco-Pondicherians, descendants of local Tamilians who opted to take up the offer of French citizenship in the early 1960s when Pondicherry was handed back to India as a union territory within the state of Tamil Nadu. Others are a small but significant band of French expats who have chosen to settle in Pondicherry for lifestyle reasons.

The relationship between France and India has long been a comfortable one and, as India asserts itself as a growing economic power, is quietly steaming ahead. French president François Hollande made a brief and relatively low-profile visit to New Delhi in February, during which he discussed India's plans to buy €9bn worth of jet fighters from French company Rafale, a \$7bn agreement for French energy giant Areva to build the world's biggest civilian nuclear-power plant in western India, and other joint deals (see panel, opposite page).

The convivial relationship is in contrast to India's attitude towards its former major colonial master, Britain, which is tinged with lingering distrust. Fournier attributes this to the fact that France left Pondicherry voluntarily and signed a treaty. "We didn't want to hurt our future relationship with India, knowing that the subcontinent would become increasingly important in decades to come," he says. Decades after the handover, France's



- 01 Pierre Fournier at the French Consulate
- 02 A colonial façade
- 03 Pétanque draws a crowd
- 04 Benjamin Passicos and Grégory Lassus, owners of Villa Helena
- 05 Road sign in both Tamil and French
- 06 Café des Arts, one of many restaurants
- 07 Ashok Panda of Intach
- 08 Employee at Villa Helena
- 09 In Café des Arts
- 10 South Indian temple
- 11 A Pondicherry schoolgirl



influence is most visible in the section of the French quarter closest to the seafront, a neighbourhood that is still known by its old – and eyebrow-raising – moniker White Town. There are numerous cafés with steak frites and crêpes on their menus, a French *lycée* with about 1,000 students studying towards an International Baccalaureate, two properties of the Alliance Française and two French research houses. Local bakeries turn out pitch-perfect baguettes while a statue of Joan of Arc features prominently on beachfront promenade Goubert Avenue.

Pondicherry is cleaved into two parts by a canal that separates White Town from the Tamil part of the city. The French quarter is quiet and mostly residential while the Tamil side is much like any other bustling south Indian urban area: chaotic.

"The Tamil part of town is our real heritage," says Ashok Panda, who heads the Pondicherry chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach), a body that plays a pivotal part in the maintenance and restoration of historically important buildings. "The city itself is the tourist draw – we don't have spectacular sights or monuments."

There is, however, a new sense of urgency surrounding the need to protect local buildings. "Pondicherry is in danger of losing its unique character if we don't



restore and protect our old buildings," says Panda. "It's now or never: many buildings are in danger of crumbling." The upkeep of buildings that are 200 years old in some cases is a pricey affair, which means that the promise of a coastal Shangri-la comes with caveats. Take the example of Grégory Lassus and his partner Benjamin Passicos, who moved to India 18 months ago looking for sustainable business opportunities and now own Villa Helena, a lovingly restored guesthouse. "The biggest mistake Europeans can make is to think that India is cheap," says Lassus, who estimates that would-be Pondicherry entrepreneurs should have no less than €150,000 euros in their pocket.

As well as running the guesthouse, both men have had to take other jobs: Passicos is café manager at La Maison Rose while Lassus, a former equestrian in Paris, trains aspiring horseriders in Chennai and Bangalore. "Europe was closing down and young entrepreneurs like us, with not so much capital, felt completely shut out of the system financially," says Passicos.

Pondicherry is a tempting destination but residents fear that its burgeoning popularity could spell doom for its delicately spun urban ecosystem. "We need to think 50 years ahead," says Probir Banerjee, head of a local citizens action group. "Pondicherry has huge potential if its growth is handled correctly." — (M)

Very French affairs

Accompanied by six ministers and 60 French CEOs – among them the bosses of Areva, Dassault and LVMH – French president François Hollande had a clear message for his Indian hosts during his recent visit: there is business to be done.

At €7.5bn, Franco-Indian bilateral trade is impressive but still far from the ambitious €12bn target set by the two countries in 2008. French nuclear fuel and know-how featuring strongly in the relationship and the nuclear dimension could help to explain why India was so uncharacteristically supportive of France's intervention in Mali.

"Across the border from Mali, the security of Niger's uranium wealth is not just France's concern but India's as well, as it too is an end-user," says Paris-based international-news reporter Leela Jacinto. "It's a bilateral relationship that is often overlooked but increasingly France and India are there for each other at critical times."

Building on the recent Bonjour India and Namaste France cultural festivals organised by both countries on each other's soil, four Indian films were screened at last year's Cannes film festival and at the 2013 edition, India is celebrating a centenary of cinema. There have been similar collaborations in the realm of scientific research and education, where the number of Indian students heading to France has doubled in the past five years.

France is keen to make up for lost time. Until this year there had been just six presidential visits to India since the Fifth Republic was founded; French commentators are suggesting that more trips be scheduled immediately to maintain the momentum of this fledgling *partenariat stratégique*.