

FIRST ARUNCHALA MARGA PILGRIMAGE IN SOUTH INDIA

19 December 2017 to 2 January 2018

Here's highlights from a journey which words cannot fully describe...

Chennai - we began our pilgrimage by visiting the Vara Siddhi Vinayagar Temple where we made offerings to Lord Ganesha asking him to remove all obstacles from our journey. And then we sought the blessings of Mother Mary in her little church on the beach in Besant Nagar.

Pondicherry – the old French Colony where many of the buildings have a distinctly French look and streets are still named in the French “rue”. Here we visited the beautiful Manakula Vinyagar Temple, the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and a small Temple hidden inconspicuously between commercial shops. In this small shrine the great treasure - the original Thiruvagasam - the sacred Tamil song sung by Saint Manikavasagar and written by Shiva - is hidden in a silver box. A beautiful reminder that some of the greatest gems are hidden in places of simplicity. Then we went to the Pratyangira Devi Temple deep inside a semi-forest. Here we worshiped the Mother who bears the fierce face of a lion and body of a woman, reminding us of the gentle but powerful love of the Mother.

Chidambaram - we first sought the permission and blessings of Thillai Kali who is the guardian of this Holy Place. We then took a serene boat ride in the Pichavaram Mangrove which gives us an idea of what Chidambaram was like thousands of years ago when Shiva manifested his dance here. We then entered the Great Temple of Lord Nataraja! I could feel his dance in every fibre of my being - more than usual. I realized he was even more jubilant because I had brought his children with me whose ancestors have called upon his name over so many generations. Overwhelmed with emotion I struggled to relate the story of Chidambaram. He melts the heart and tears flow. As Ramu Deekshiter Uncle told us “not just that you have come to see him, but he is desiring to see you”. And then we had the rare opportunity to go into the Inner Sanctum and see The Lord so close. The tears in many of our eyes was the only offering we could give him.



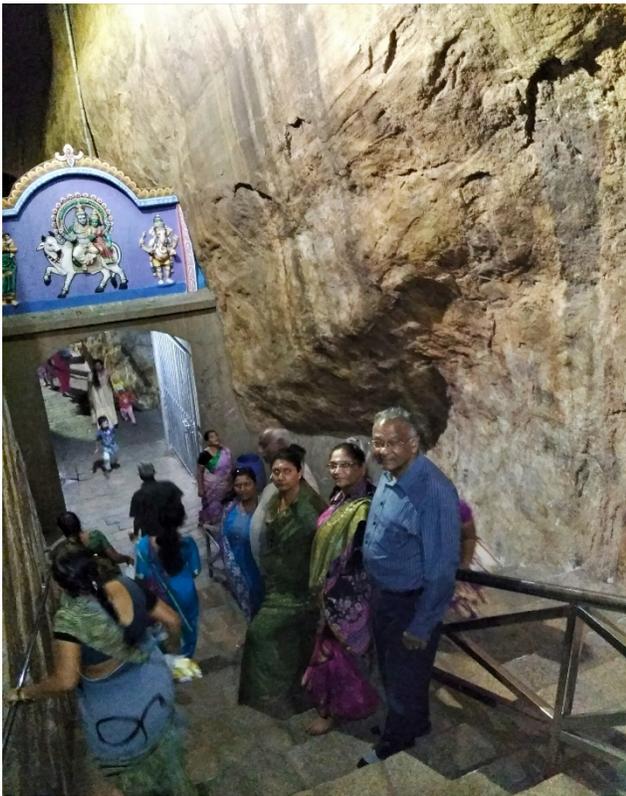
“O Shiva-Nataraja of Chidambaram, to reach your raised foot of Grace is all I seek.”

And near Lord Nataraja is the Shrine of Lord Govindaraja (Vishnu) who lies on the serpent Adi-Sesha in a state of blissfulness as he watches the mesmerizing dance of the Lord of Chidambaram. ■

Vailankanni - where Mother Mary appeared and performed many miracles. Here one could feel the gentle love of the Mother. An atmosphere of calmness and devotion prevailed. People crawling on their knees to the shrine and singing in sweet Tamil to Mother Mary clothed in a Sari emphasized the holiness of the place. For many of us in the group she was but another appearance of the Divine Mother Shakti.



Trichy where we climbed up Ucchi Pillayar - a temple built a thousand years ago through a hill. What an amazing accomplishment! We greeted Lord Ganesha as Ucchi Pillayar on top of the hill and prayed before Thayumanavar - Shiva as Mother. Then we went wedding shopping for two members of the group - a Thali for the "bride" and dhoti for the "groom".



The next day we visited Sri Rangam and received the blessing of Lord Vishnu from outside as the queue would have taken at least 4 hours for darshan. But the Garuda (his vehicle) radiated his beauty and grace to us and Lord Hanuman blessed us as we chanted the Hanuman Chalisa.

Then we visited the Water-Lingum in Tiruvannaikaval under which a perennial spring flows. Here an elephant and spider were the first devotees of the Lord. The story of their fight and why the inner sanctum of the temple is so small is most delightful. We also received the powerful darshan of Akilandeswari, the Mother of the whole universe.



In the evening we went to the Christian Ashram, Shantivanam, which worships Christ using the rich cultural symbols and traditions of India.

Here George (Christian) and Ragini (Hindu) renewed their wedding vows with the tying of the thali and exchanging of rings. A beautiful symbol of interfaith harmony.

We then joined an international gathering in welcoming the birth of Jesus in different languages and cultural expressions. Truly the One God comes to all of us in different names and forms. And irrespective of language or culture we are all called to worship that One God. Our group rocked the small chapel with the song “Om Shakti Om”.

Thiruvannamalai where Shiva appeared as a Pillar of Fire and now stands as the Holy Mountain **Arunachala**! We sat in Ramana Ashram listening to the Akshara Mana Malai in the actual place where it was written. We climbed into the mountain and meditated in the sacred caves. We walked in the serene forest at the foothill of Arunachala. And we had the phenomenal opportunity of sitting inside the inner sanctum of the main temple for the abhishikam of Lord Arunachala. The purifying heat of the self-manifested Fire-Lingum here burns away many lifetimes of karmas. Then we performed giri-pradakshina – the 14km walk around Arunachala who is the centre of the universe – from 11pm to 3am. Three days of indescribable bliss.

What can we say about Arunachala? There is truly no place like it! To hear his Name is grace, to think of Him is more grace, to have a guru who guides you to Him is even more grace, and more grace to set foot in this holy place, and to stand in the Inner Sanctum of the Temple is grace unimaginable, and to those who see the Jothi - the fire lit on the Mountain once a year - there is no higher grace that can be attained.

“O Arunachala, how many sights have these eyes seen, and yet you remain the most dazzling. How many words have these ears heard and yet the sound of your Name mutes them all. O Arunachala, where in the whole cosmos is there a place like Thiruvannamalai? Is there a Mountain like the Hill of Light? Is there another Temple whose inner-sanctum radiates such divine purifying heat? Is there anywhere else, O Arunachala, where my heart can rest but in you? So, if you my Lord, does not finish the work you have begun then how hopeless my plight is indeed. For where else can liberation be gained with such little effort and where else is grace is so lavishly given?” Needless to say it was difficult to leave Arunachala - many of our hearts stayed behind!



Kanchipuram - to see the great Goddess Kamakshi. What a beautiful temple fit for the Queen of queens. I prayed silently asking her to bring us all close to her. And she heard! Before we knew it we were ushered right into the sanctum sanctorum where we had the most beautiful darshan of the Mother. Dressed in a purple and green kanchivaram sari she stole my heart.

Then we visited the Shiva Temple in Kanchipuram where the Earth-Lingum was made by the Divine Mother herself. And some of the men in the group had the privilege of carrying the Lord on his palanquin that night.

The next morning we meditated under the sapling of the 3500 year old mango tree that the Divine Mother herself meditated under. And in the midst of all of this the ladies made sure they don't leave Kanchipuram without their Kanchivaram saris.

Thirupathi, the abode of Lord Vishnu as Venkateswara Govinda. Many of us were physically drained by now so only three of us braved the five hour climb up Thirumala. 3550 blessed stairs - what an amazing journey! Being the day after Vaikuntha Ekadasi - one of the main days for the worship for Lord Vishnu - the waiting time for darshan was at least 24 hours. So we skipped it and instead sat outside his temple singing to the Lord of Thirumala. We fondly remembered our ancestors shouting "Govinda, Govinda, Gooovinda" during Purattasi - and felt extremely blessed to be here. Even though we couldn't see him with our physical eyes we knew that he saw us and blessed us through those walls. And then we indulged in the famous Thirupathi Ladoo - which itself is a mission to obtain.



Shri Kalahasti where Shiva dwells as the Wind-Lingum. In the Inner Sanctum a flame ever dances before the Lord as if a mysterious wind is blowing it. And the next morning we climbed the little hill behind the Temple to Bhakta Kannappa's shrine, the ardent devotee of Shiva who offered his own eye to the Lord. May the gentle wind of Shiva's grace refresh and guide us in the Pilgrimage of Life until we rest in our Eternal Home.



And then back to **Chennai**. We had a beautiful intimate New Year service in our hotel room. And on New Year's Day we climbed St Thomas Mount. St Thomas was one of the original disciples of Jesus who came to India. We slowly prayed through the Stations of the Cross as we climbed the hill. It was deeply meaningful to consecrate the New Year in this way and to see in the journey of Jesus our own human journey's reflected. On top of the Mountain we prayed before the Miraculous Cross of St Thomas which the saint himself is said to have carved.



Finally, we ended where we began - at the same Vara Siddhi Vinayagar Temple - to thank Lord Ganesha for a successful pilgrimage. A journey marked with tears from hearts melting at the Divine Grace experienced in the holy places, and so much laughter in between, and just Love!

So the next morning with much reluctance, and tears, and hearts overflowing with love we brought this step in the spiritual journey to an end knowing that in Arunachala-Marga many many more awesome moments await us.

May we who belong to Arunachala Marga - the way to the Mountain of Light - remain steadfast on the pilgrimage of life which leads back to the heart of God.

Blessings of Love and Light to all,

Father Kumeran