



Tiruvannamalai: Serenity in Every Corner

Description

By Kowsalya JP

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The Tiruvannamalai Temple

The vibrant life in Tiruvannamalai, where devotees, foreigners, and workers come together in a sacred space. Discover the heartfelt offerings made in the temples and witness the harmony between people and animals in this spiritual community. Experience the beauty of devotion and the shared moments that bring everyone together in this unique and peaceful environment.

A Splash of Blessings



Devotees seeking the blessings

As the sun rises, devotees gather in eager anticipation at Mahadeepam. The flickering light of the Mahadeepam symbolises enlightenment and the divine. Devotees break coconuts, releasing not just the water but their hopes and prayers. As the coconuts shatter, water sprays across the gathered crowd, creating a lively atmosphere filled with a moment of divine connection. Each splash of coconut water is a shared blessing.

Oleg's Journey: A Life Without Currency in Tiruvannamalai

Oleg, a traveller from Russia, found himself captivated by the serene beauty of Tiruvannamalai. He had initially come to explore the sacred town, a destination known for its spiritual significance and stunning landscapes. As he walked through the vibrant streets, he noticed something remarkable: many people lived here without money, yet they radiated a sense of happiness and contentment.



Oleg performing acrobatics

He set up a modest space in the forest, sleeping under the stars, surrounded by the calming sounds of nature. Food was never a concern for Oleg, as the nearby temple offered meals to anyone in need. He quickly learned the community's customs and gratefully accepted food from those who valued sharing. Each meal reminded him of the kindness found here, where generosity took the place of money.

Living this way allowed Oleg to explore the true essence of survival. He no longer defined himself by what he owned but by the experiences he had. Reflecting on his life back in Russia, Oleg realised how different things were. In his homeland, living outdoors after dark could lead to trouble, often resulting in encounters with authorities. Here, however, he felt a sense of freedom and safety that was both surprising and liberating.

While he respected the local religious practices, Oleg approached spirituality differently. He wasn't drawn to rituals or beliefs; instead, he sought to understand life by immersing himself in the daily experiences of those around him. Oleg also teaches outdoor acrobatics to school students, sharing his enthusiasm for movement and skill, and contributing to the experiences that shape his identity beyond what he owns.

Oleg learned that the richness of life is found in experiences and relationships, not in material wealth.

The Silent Saint of Tiruvannamalai

Tiruvannamalai is a place where spirituality thrives, and it is common to see many saints and seekers making their way up the sacred mountain. Among them was a particular saint whose mystery and serenity were notable. He moved quietly, his footsteps almost silent against the rocky path.



A saint walking up the mountain

As he climbed, there was something charming about his calm presence, a peacefulness that stood out against the busy energy of the town below. I took a photograph of him from a distance, hoping to capture the essence of his spirit. He noticed me and approached with grace. Without uttering a single word, he reached into his robes and took out a small cloth containing holy ash, known as vibhuti, and applied it to my forehead, a blessing that felt both profound and sacred.

After giving the blessing, the saint continued his ascent up the hill. His calmness was a strong reminder that genuine spirituality often surpasses verbal expression.

Expressions of Faith



Devotee trying to connect spiritually

With unwavering faith, the spear pierces through the cheek of a devotee. It is a moment of intense spiritual connection and personal sacrifice. The ritual leaves its marks, both physical and spiritual. This experience is not just about the physical act; it's a journey of faith and connection to something greater than themselves. The ritual of spears piercing through cheeks stands as a powerful symbol of the strength of faith and the determination of the human spirit, a reminder that devotion often requires both courage and sacrifice.

Full Moon Feast: Sharing Blessings at Gugai Namasivayarâ??s Cave

The cave is named after the sage Gugai Namasivayar, a devoted follower of Lord Shiva, who is said to have lived and meditated there centuries ago. According to locals, He chose this cave for its serene environment, nestled amidst the hills. It is believed that he spent many years in meditation.



Inside the Gugai Namasivayar cave

At Gugai Namasivayarâ??s cave, on every full moon day, food is offered to everyone who comes to pray. This practice brings the community together, as people donate funds to support these offerings.

The cave is located at the foothill, making it a perfect stop for devotees climbing the hill. As they rest, they can also enjoy the food and connect with others. These offerings not only provide nourishment but also create a sense of unity and sharing among all who visit. Itâ??s a beautiful way to honour the spirit of Gugai Namasivayar and support one another in prayer.

Anithaâ??s Joyful Service at the Temple

Anitha, an unmarried woman, has dedicated the past five years of her life to working at the Tiruvannamalai temple. Every day, she arrives early, broomstick in hand, ready to clean the sacred spaces with a sense of purpose and joy.

She takes great pride in her role, knowing that her efforts contribute to the sanctity of the temple and the comfort of the many devotees who visit. Each sweep of her broom is infused with a spirit of service, and she approaches her tasks with a smile, feeling grateful for the opportunity to support her family through her work..

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One of the women doing labour for the community

Many other women have joined her in this labour of love. They work side by side, creating a supportive community where each shares the common goal of providing for their families. One of her colleagues is a pregnant woman who, despite her condition, continues to fulfil her duties with determination.

Mulai Paal: Waters of Blessing and Healing. The Mulai Paal Theertham stands as a precious one among the 360 holy water bodies that once graced the region, of which 90% have sadly vanished, replaced by houses and urban development. This sacred site, located approximately 1 kilometre from the city, is situated on the slopes of Tiruvannamalai Hill.

Traditionally, our ancestors dug ponds near temples during their construction, believing they would provide a place for devotees travelling from afar to bathe and cleanse themselves before worship. Over the years, the water from these ponds has evolved to serve significant purposes, including abhishekam, the ritual bathing of the main deity.

At Mulai Paal Theertham, water flows through herbaceous trees, shrubs, and rocky landscapes from the mountain's summit. Revered for its purity, this water is believed to possess various medicinal properties, capable of curing numerous ailments.

Before, devotees who visit the temple often fill their bottles with this sacred water, taking it home as a cherished source of blessings and healing. Now, at Mulai Paal Theertham, the locals living at the foothills of Tiruvannamalai rely on the water for their everyday activities, and it is also used by wandering saints and devotees.

Langurs of Tiruvannamalai

The Tufted Grey Langur is found inhabiting the slopes of Arunachala, especially on the southeast side. All Langur species are largely grey with black faces.



Tufted Grey Langur

In Indian mythology, this is because Hanuman, the monkey warrior, burnt his hands attempting to rescue Lord Rama's wife. Hanuman langurs, or grey langurs, can be spotted on the southeastern slopes of Tiruvannamalai mountain. As devotees make their way to the top, these curious monkeys gaze hopefully, waiting for snacks. Many hikers pause to share fruits, fostering a charming connection between people and wildlife.

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