

The 2000-year-old Grand Anicut



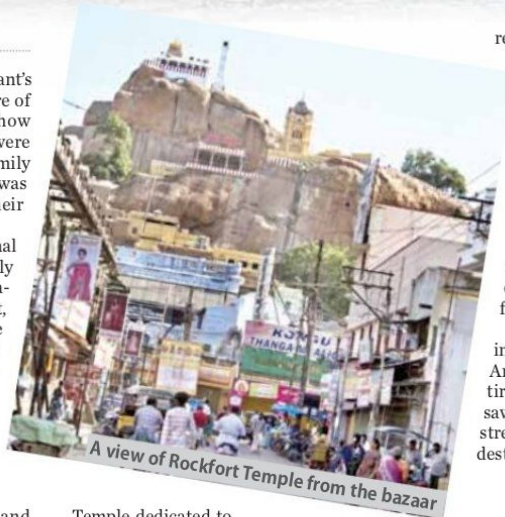
# The temple town of Trichy

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“Thwack”, down came the elephant’s trunk on my head, in a gesture of blessing. I was surprised at how gentle it was, gentle giants indeed. We were in Trichy to attend a wedding at our family friends’ home and the temple elephant was here to bless the newlyweds, to flag off their journey together on an auspicious note.

Even though I grew up in a traditional South Indian family this was completely unexpected. It isn’t every day that a majestic elephant walks into a wedding. But, knowing where I was, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Tiruchirapalli or Trichy as one familiarly calls it, has always been an important religious centre for the Hindus with many a prolific and ancient temple peppered around town, from the more famous Ranganatha Swamy Temple of Srirangam to the Rockfort Temple.

I am yet to see a temple so striking and haughty in its simplicity, as the Rockfort Temple. It draws your gaze in, from wherever in the city you are, like a pivot. So, here is where we went first, this intriguing symbol of the city of Trichy. As we wound our way through the busy bazaar; at the foot of the rock, there were the usual lines of people going about their prayers in the Ganesh Temple, which was right there, that made me wonder - but did “Uchi Pillayar Kovil” not mean Ganesh Temple at the top, literally? It was then that our guide explained to us that there are two rock-cut temples in the fort, the lower and upper cave temples. Having paid our respects at the lower cave temple, we began the steep climb of over 350 steps inside the ancient rock that dates back to over a billion years. Of the many cave temples that we passed by, cut into this monolithic rock, the oldest was built by the Pallavas in 580 AD. While the Thayumana Swamy



Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvathi is stunning right from its architecture spanning a length of two stories in a

**One of the oldest inhabited cities of Tamil Nadu, Trichy is home to numerous temples both unique and popular. This city, which today is an education hub, has a recorded history that dates back to 300 BC, making it an ideal destination to explore not just for the religiously inclined but for history buffs alike**

regular building to the colourful murals painted on the walls of the cave; it is the Ganesh temple sitting right at the summit that takes your breath away. As you come out of the caves and struggle to climb up the sheer rock face to reach this temple, you are bound to pause for breath and that is when you realise just how picturesque the panorama of the city is. We did too. Catching my breath as the breeze blew cool in my face, I caught my first glimpse of Srirangam from there.

The largest functioning Hindu temple in the world, second in size only to the Angkor Wat, Srirangam occupies an entire islet in Trichy. Early next morning saw us there before the crowds started streaming in, for it is a popular pilgrimage destination for tourists from across India.

A total of 21 magnificent “gopurams” (temple towers) sketching an axial path through 7 rectangular “prakharas” (enclosures) formed from concentric fort walls spread over 156 acres make up this temple complex. It isn’t just enormous; it is a beautiful sight to behold. The powdery blue sky setting to perfect contrast, the uniform pastels of these gopurams towering over the city. There is even a gopuram viewpoint within the temple and is surely not to be missed. Srirangam owes its fame not just to its main deity, Ranganatha Swamy, who is but the Lord Vishnu in his recumbent form on the serpent Adishesha, but also for the fact that it was once cited as the example of a utopian society based on religion. For the entire city of Srirangam lived within these very walls of the temple.

From here on we continued our exploration of the city, discovering temples older and legendary including the Jambukeshwara Temple, driving even further into the district of Trichy, and ending up at one of the oldest dams in the world, the Grand Anicut.

## FACT FILE

**Sitting right in the centre of Tamil Nadu, Trichy is 335 kilometres from Chennai and one can reach here by road in six hours. There are also regular flights from Chennai to Trichy**



Gopurams of Srirangam