

## Alluring history and legacy of artifacts of Tamil Nadu

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Relief of a woman about to give birth on the temple walls at Darasuram |

*Three of the four UNESCO World Heritage sites in Tamil Nadu, are located in the central heart of the state – all three, a lasting legacy of the Cholas. Renowned for their stone architecture and metal sculpture work, the unique art of the Cholas beckons travellers, centuries after they were first created. Making either Trichy, Kumbakonam or Thanjavur the base, it is possible to catch a glimpse of both these enduring legacies of the Cholas in a day, And save time for more!, writes*

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Central Tamil Nadu was at one time, the heartland of the Cholas. This is where the river Kaveri, (also known as Ponnai in Tamil), is worshipped as the Mother Goddess for feeding the land and people with her abundance. Of the four UNESCO World Heritage sites in Tamil Nadu, three are located in this region – all a legacy of the Cholas that ruled the area from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The Cholas were famous for their stone architecture as also their exquisite metal sculpture-work. If one wished to experience a taste of both in a day, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam or Trichy, would be a great place to start!

**Airavateshwara temple, Darasuram**







35 kms from Thanjavur (5 kms from Kumbakonam/ 95 kms from Trichy), is the spectacular Airavateshwara Temple of Darasuram – a living Chola temple. While most tourists visiting the state, make a halt at the Brihadeeshwara Temple (Periya Koyil) in Thanjavur, few people visit Darasuram and miss discovering a veritable gem. While the former is renowned for its architecture and grandness, Darasuram delights a patient visitor with its ornate and exquisite sculpture work.

Commissioned by Rajaraja Chola II and completed in 1160 AD, the main deity of this temple is Lord Shiva, who is worshipped here as Airavateshwara. Legend has it that Airavata, Lord Indra's white elephant-mount was once cursed by Rishi Durvasa and as a result, lost its colour. The elephant is then said to have worshipped Lord Shiva and bathed in the temple tank at Darasuram, after which its colour was magically restored. The Lord of the temple was hence named as Airavateshwara.

### **Breathing life into stone**

A flight of Musical Steps greets the visitor at the gate. Each step, one is told, produced a musical note. But abandon any thoughts about experimenting with them as the steps are caged within a metal grill to protect it from vandalism. As one steps inside, one is immediately drawn into the exquisite sculpture-work hewn painstakingly into the hard granite. The front mandapa, fashioned in the form of a chariot on wheels abounds with panels bursting with scenes from Indian mythology and Bharatanaytam poses. In some episodes from the Ramayana, one can see, more than 500 years later, not just the features of the characters depicted but also notice their subtle expressions! Such is the mastery of the sculpture-work.

Unique sculptures such as the syncretic symbol of union of the Bull and the Elephant, a panel showing a lady about to give birth, events from the lives of the 63 Nayanmar saints, Yali, the mythical creature and more can be found on the panels.

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Bronze casting workshops at Swamimalai





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About 8 km west from Kumbakonam, on the northern banks of the River Kaveri, is the town of Swamimalai, one of the most revered abodes of Lord Murugan, son of Lord Shiva. Legend from the Kanda Purana has it that son became guru to the father at Swamimalai, explaining to him the meaning of the Pranava Mantra. Perhaps a myth that began to bring about a synthesis of two popular cults – one amongst many such syncretic tales ones finds in India.

While the temple is the point of attraction for a devotee, those not so interested in pilgrimage have no reason to despair. The history and art buff, can wander around Swamimalai town dotted with workshops of bronze casters, where one can watch craftsmen working away on creating bronze statues. The sthapatis (casters) are said to belong to the Vishwakarma community, whose name derives from the mythical Vishwakarma, the divine architect of the gods. These casters claim to be descendants of the sculptors who served King Raja Raja Chola I in the construction of the Brihadeeshwara temple at Thanjavur. As per their genealogy, after the temple of Thanjavur was finished, a group of sculptors migrated and settled down in Swamimalai.



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These sculptors continue to use the same wax-casting process that is said to have been used during the Chola times. Upon special request, workshop owners appear happy to welcome visitors and show and explain the process of casting by the lost-wax technique. The process begins by measuring and marking the desired figure with the help of the frond of a palm tree. Thereafter a wax model of the bronze figure is made and carefully crafted to perfection. This is covered with three layers of clay of a specific quality found in the Kaveri Basin. Next, the mould is heated, causing the wax to melt, which creates a hollow within. Molten metal from the foundry comprising an alloy of copper, silver, gold, tin and lead is then poured into the hollow to take the place of the melted wax. One can witness this ancient method of Lost-Wax Bronze Casting at the workshops even today.

The Chola period is well known for achieving great heights in several spheres. Amongst others, for great aesthetic and technical mastery in the realms of Architecture and Sculpture. It is said that the bronze icons of the Cholas form one of India's greatest contributions to the world of art. Most famous of course, of Chola bronzes is the statue of Shiva as Nataraja, the Lord of Dance. So, on your next visit to Tamil Nadu, leave some time aside to admire not just the breath-taking arts but the fascinating crafts as well!

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