

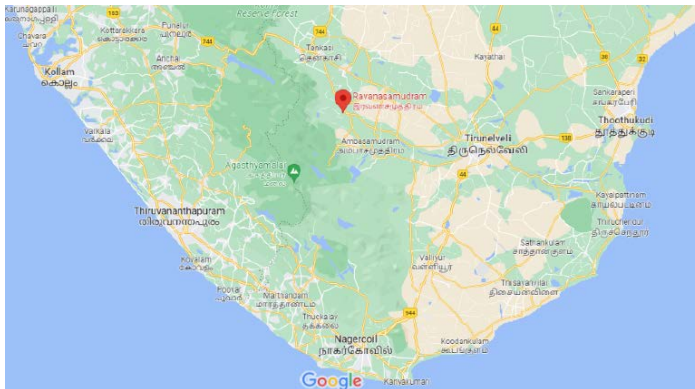


TRAVELOGUE - RAVANASAMUDRAM AND TENKASI

July 2023



Tucked away in the interiors of the Southern peninsula of India, equidistant from the Eastern Coastal city of Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu and the Western coastal city of Trivandrum, in Kerala and about an hours' drive north of Kanyakumari, and on the foothills of the Western ghats lies the town of Tenkasi and amongst the nearby villages, is the village of Ravanasmudram (RVS for short), which was our destination.



It is in these 2 places (RVS and Tenkasi and surroundings) where we had a great family holiday recently and this note is to document some of the highlights.



RVS is the ancestral home to Akila's parents, RR Sankar uncle and Jaya Aunty, who celebrated their Sadabhishekam in grand style. The ceremonies were elaborate but done in a thorough and austere manner and the chanting of the rudras were soothing and empowering.



Home to about 1000 inhabitants on one side of the railway tracks, RVS has traditional row houses, with a grand temple (over 600 years old) in the middle, which serves as a congregation point for the residents who all know each other. The simplicity of the temple coupled with the peaceful environment is a stark contrast to the more commercialized and overcrowded temples one gets to see in the cities.



The occasional call of the peacocks pierces through the air, waking you up from whatever thoughts one is buried in and makes you look up from your mobile phones and admire the beautiful landscapes. The skyline is fringed by the majestic Western ghat mountains, and the plains with agricultural activity and tall palms laded with “*nongu*” fruit. A band of monkeys circle the houses constantly looking for interesting food. We were warned to keep the doors and windows shut to ensure there are no monkey trespassers. Otherwise, no one locks their front doors even at night.



The town of Tenkasi wakes up very early. It is home to one of the majestic temples in the region, Kasi Viswanathar temple, built in the 13th Century and boasts a very tall and beautiful gopuram, which sticks out of the city skyline, almost like a lighthouse for the

city’s daily routine. There are inscriptions in the temple dated 1384 from the period of King Vira Pandyan mentioning the gift of houses and villages to Brahmanas to recite Vedas and Purana.



Opposite the grand steps that lead up to the temple is the small shop called the Lala Shop that has built its reputation to sell the best Tirunelveli halwa. We bought some there.

As you go up the steps towards the temple, a gust of wind pushes you into the main entrance all the way into the grassy courtyard that separates the wall and the temple interiors. After our darshan, we sat in the courtyard watching many other visitors and devotees sit and bask in the cooler evening sunset. A few boys successfully shimmied up a vertical blue colored metal pole whilst others tried and slipped and slid down. As you go out of the entrance the same gust of wind pushes you out.

The other highlight in Tenkasi is the famous “*Shree Madhuram Pure Vegetarian*” restaurant. It has the reputation of being the best in Tenkasi and it did not disappoint. Food was tasty, ambience was clean and well lit, staff friendly and good service and the price reasonable. So, we ended up eating there, daily almost every meal apart from the ones at the Sadabhishekam function (which was also catered by Madhuram).





Taking baths in the waterfalls was something we were all looking forward to. I remember as a child some trips to waterfalls where just wearing a chaddi (or was it a langoti aka komanam?) we took nice long baths under the falls. The Five Falls, at Coutrallam, where we first went, was crowded and after a 40-minute wait in the queue, we got to stand under the falls for about 3-4 minutes.

The jostling of sweaty bodies, the constant queue cutting by different people, made the whole experience worse. The main falls of Coutrallam, did not have as much water than the Five Falls. We did not even bother going in and instead walked

through the street market selling all kinds of stuff.

The hilltop of Swamimalai hosts the temple dedicated to Lord Murugan. As we got to the top of the hills, there were strong gusts of wind and I had to further tighten my dhoti, to prevent from getting blown away and land somewhere in Kerala! From the hilltop you can see the ghats very clearly and can imagine Kerala on the other side, its population speaking an entirely different language and living a very different way of life than on this side. I was also remembering the Altay mountains, on the border of Xinjiang province in China and on the other side of it, Kazakhstan, having very different cultures, languages, habits.



Another delightful highlight of the trip was the bath we had in the river, at Sivasailam. The crisp and cool water was chest high, relatively clean but cloudy and the ground very gravelly but not hurtful to the feet.



As you enter the river from the few steps leading down from the temple, we encountered a row of local women washing the laundry, bashing someone's branded clothes mercilessly on the second last step. Navigating in between these soapy obstacles, I slid into the water, inch by inch, to get the body accustomed to the cool water. Once you were in, it was blissful, especially the outside temperature was warm to hot. The surroundings peaceful and everyone splashed each other and had a great time.



The temple adjacent to the river is also ancient. It was built circa 700 AD and has a similar architecture to the temples we had seen earlier. One can see different layers in the temple architecture, contributed and influenced, by the different kings and kingdoms.

The focus of the trip was to be with the family, which included my mother, my sister Prema and her husband Mani and son Anandh, my brother Sekhar, his wife Akila and her children Varsha and Navi, Akila's brother Ranjith, his wife Haripriya and their 2 boys, Vishnu and Vignesh and of course Akila's parents Sankar uncle and Jaya Aunty.

I always remember with fondness time spent with my grandparents and it was good for Akila's and Ranjith's kids to experience that, which will remain with them in the future. Also, it was great to see all the cousins bond quickly and despite some big gaps in their age, interact and play well.

Now as I settle into my routine life in Bangalore, the sound of the peacocks rings in my ears and my palate still remembers the sticky and tasty Tirunelveli halwa (which I cannot crave too much thanks to my sugar condition). The place is certainly worth a second visit but the next time we will base ourselves out of Tenkasi and not the touristy Five Falls area.

Thank you, RR Sankar uncle and Jaya Aunty, for making this happen.