



## ON THE JASMINE TRAIL

The holy city of Madurai, famous for its towering Hindu shrines, is also home to South India's most fragrant flower. **SHOBA NARAYAN** follows an artisan perfumer on a quest from bazaar to factory to field.

**IT** BEGAN, as things often do in India, with a visit to the temple. A monsoon shower broke as I ran toward the carved stone entrance of Madurai's Meenakshi Amman temple, where women sat in rows selling strings of flowers from wicker baskets. "Buy a garland of roses for the goddess," they called. "A string of jasmine for your hair." The scent of sambac jasmine, tuberose, marjoram, myrrh, champak magnolia, and rose infused the damp air as we entered, like a fragrant blessing.

I was in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu with Jahnavi Lakhota Nandan, a perfumer who trained in Versailles and now shuttles between Paris and Goa to work on her boutique brand, the **Perfume Library** ([theparfumelibrary.com](http://theparfumelibrary.com)). Nandan had invited me along on a research trip to Madurai, where she sources many of her ingredients. "The best jasmine in the world comes from here," Nandan explained, referring to a variety locals know as *kundu malli*, or "rounded jasmine." Around Madurai, the tropical climate

and red, fertile soil endow the blooms with a voluptuous, layered scent not found elsewhere.

Indian culture is suffused with perfume. It inhabits our ancient texts and enhances our daily routines. From water scented with holy basil, known locally as *tulsi*, to sandalwood paste and garlands of jasmine and roses, Hindu rituals use an array of fragrances to bathe, decorate, and feed their gods. The city of Madurai is one of the most iconic pilgrimage destinations in India, so the buying and selling of flowers is big business. From her sprawling 14th-century temple complex—one of the country's largest—the Hindu goddess Meenakshi extracts tens of thousands of blooms from her worshippers each day.

To witness jasmine being picked, Nandan said, we needed to set off early. It was still dark when we left the colonial grandeur of our lodgings, the Gateway Hotel Pasumalai Madurai, and headed to the undulating hills outside the city. At dawn, the women who work in the jasmine fields were already out, wearing scarves

Madurai's Meenakshi Amman temple, where pilgrims leave tens of thousands of blooms each day.

A field worker with a string of jasmine in her hair gathers buds on a plantation outside Madurai.



◀ A Madurai flower picker collects jasmine buds in the skirt of her sari.

on their heads to protect against the sun. Row upon row of *kundu malli* bushes were being stripped, their buds first gathered in the skirts of the workers' saris and then, at the field house, packed in baskets and trucked to the market. The blooms would open that evening; by the following morning, their fragrance would be gone. "It's amazing how the scent changes every hour," Nandan said, walking barefoot among the plants.

Nandan makes a conscious effort to incorporate Indian botanicals in her perfumes. At her Paris atelier, shelves and surfaces are packed with dozens of glass bottles, each bearing the name of a different ingredient. One of her best-selling perfumes, *Aphtoori Absolute*, is what's known in the industry as an oriental scent—a warm, sensual blend of musk, yerba mate, and, of course, jasmine. "Different perfumers are gifted in different ways," she told me. "I have an affinity for flowers. I'm good at playing with them."

After almost two hours in the jasmine fields, Nandan headed back to Madurai. The sun was high by the time we reached the flower market in Mattuthavani, in the northeastern corner of town. Depending on the season, the stalls lining this bazaar receive between 13 and 27 tons of jasmine each morning. Buds picked before dawn are vacuum-packed and sent off to New Delhi, Europe, and the U.S., where Indian-Americans and expats decorate their Bollywood-style weddings with strings of jasmine. Mid-morning buds go to city temples, political rallies, and flower vendors, who fan out across Madurai selling

garlands for women to string through their hair. An 18-inch string costs about \$1—roughly the same as a spritz of Tom Ford's *Jasmin Rouge*.

Heading inside, Nandan and I found men and women with sackfuls of jasmine buds jostling around a row of stalls. In each sat a trader, buying bags of flowers, calling out prices, and selling to other buyers—all at lightning speed. One of the biggest vendors, S. Rajendiran, told us that prices can fluctuate wildly. On festival days, he said, jasmine bud prices soar from 50 cents a pound to about \$35.

At the market, Nandan bought strings of jasmine, ylang-ylangs, marjorams, tulsis, roses, and lotuses. That afternoon, as we headed out of town to see raw fragrance being made at an extraction plant, Nandan kept inhaling the perfume of the garlands, which lay in her lap in a kaleidoscopic tangle. "I am trying to imprint their scent components into my memory, and thinking about how to re-create them," she explained.

Nandan buys jasmine extract for her fragrances from a supplier named Raja Palaniswamy, who also sells to international fragrance brands like Guerlain, Dior, and Chanel. When we arrived at Palaniswamy's factory, about an hour north of Madurai, we found 1,500 pounds of jasmine buds spread out on the floor. "An entire field of jasmine will go into just one bottle of perfume," Nandan said. Palaniswamy nodded: 750 pounds of flowers produce a single pound of concentrated extract.

"We have to wait for them to bloom before loading them into the extractors," Palaniswamy warned. "Otherwise the scent won't be fully developed." An hour later, the buds opened. Four men poured them into a giant cylindrical container, into which a solvent would be added. A tropical breeze lifted the scent—borne of a flower's sacrifice—to the moon rising outside the factory's open door.

"A Sufi saint was once asked what forgiveness is," Nandan said. "He replied, 'It is the scent the flower gives out when it is crushed.'" ●

## Plan a Trip to Madurai

### GETTING THERE

**Air India** ([airindia.com](http://airindia.com)) flies into Madurai through cities like New Delhi and Mumbai, as well as international hubs such as Dubai and Singapore. For a longer itinerary in Tamil Nadu, Chennai is the best entry point.

### WHERE TO STAY

The **Gateway Hotel Pasumalai Madurai** ([gateway.tajhotels.com](http://gateway.tajhotels.com); doubles from \$100) is set on the top of Pasumalai, a forested hill in the southwest of the city. Explore the property's 63-acre garden—complete with peacocks—and enjoy views of the city from Vista, the patio café.

### TOUR OPERATOR

**Marion Miller** ([mmiller@micato.com](mailto:mmiller@micato.com); 212-545-7111) of **Micato Safaris**, a member of T+L's A-List of top travel advisors, can help plan a South Indian itinerary that includes a jasmine tour of Madurai. Highlights might include the **Meenakshi Amman temple** ([madurai.meenakshi.org](http://madurai.meenakshi.org)), where Miller can arrange for a visit during a nightly ceremony in which Shiva's reunion with Meenakshi is enacted. Local guides can lead a walking tour through the flower market in the city's Mattuthavani district. You can also see raw fragrance being made at Raja Palaniswamy's facility, **Jasmine Concrete Exports** ([jasmineindia.com](http://jasmineindia.com)), an hour outside the city.