

## Travelogue February 2026

This time I am travelling alone. My colleagues from the Little Flower board, Sonja and Barbara, flew out a few days earlier with our trusty companion Martin. Murugan, the taxi driver I have known for a long time, is waiting for me at Kochi Airport in Kerala. Beforehand, I had exchanged money at the current sensational rate of 108 INR to the euro. In the past, you would only get 80–90 INR for one euro. The journey takes about 7 hours, including breaks, from 8.45 am to 4.00 pm. First we head north on a mostly four-lane motorway, then east on a country road – which is gradually being upgraded to a motorway – as far as Palani, and then the final, time-consuming kilometres back south to Perumalmalai. We climb from 350 m to 1,580 m over 51 km, a stretch that took us more than 1.5 hours. The route passes through an elephant sanctuary, and Murugan tells us he has also seen tigers recently.

At Kanzeon Zendo, the new meditation centre of Zen Master Ama Samy, there are further developments, particularly regarding the outdoor facilities. The path to the dam, from where one can look up at the waterfall, is now paved and has a hand-rail. Several terraces invite visitors to linger. There is play equipment on the playground of the Montessori school. Plans are in place for a further building with eight rooms to accommodate additional guests at the Kanzeon Zendo. Construction is scheduled to begin in spring 2026.



The next day begins, as every day does, with two 25-minute meditation sessions at 5.50 am. This is followed by breakfast and then free time until the meditation at 11.50 am before lunch. In the afternoon, there is one sitting at 3.20 pm, followed by two sittings at 5.20 pm before dinner, including dokusan (a short conversation with the master). The day concludes with music meditation at 7.30 pm. I use the time to settle in and prepare for the upcoming visit to Paramakudi. The day was accompanied by construction noise. Directly below our building, a development with wooden holiday homes and a restaurant is being built. The materials – cement and gravel in colourful sacks – are transported down the steep path in an old jeep. It kicks up dust and is quite loud.



In the morning, I am woken by the sound of rain. I am surprised, but such things can happen in the mountains. Even when my weather app shows clear skies, I remain puzzled. It is only when I see the starry sky and water on the hallway floor that I investigate and discover that a tap had come slightly loose in the basement corridor, directly behind my bed.

After breakfast, we head down across the plains with Barbara and Sonja, travelling east via Batlagundu and Madurai to Paramakudi for our PEARL project. Even with a long coffee break, the journey takes only about 4.5 hours on the new roads, covering just under 200 km. On the other hand, we've missed out on the picturesque village passes.

The welcome at PEARL is followed by a hearty lunch, then a meeting with the staff and, particularly touching, a meeting with the children who live with their parents in tents in the dry riverbed of the Vaigai River, close to the PEARL Centre. After a short break for tea and coffee, we visit the card embroiderers, who have come especially for us. This is followed by an in-depth discussion with Amala, the charismatic director of PEARL, about the future of the project.

On the way to Leelavathinagar, the village of bird and snake catchers just outside the city, we make a brief stop at the tent settlement in the riverbed. There, Pushpa, who looks after the 'Riverbed children' at PEARL, shows us around. On this balmy evening, the atmosphere is very peaceful. Men and women are squatting in front of their tents, cooking food over open fires or chatting. It is hard to imagine what it is like when it rains, when it is cold, and when the river rises. It is also always a miracle to see the children with neatly combed hair and clean school uniforms, just as we did at our meeting.





In Leelavathinagar, they are already waiting for us. Seated in front of us are the children from the afternoon tutoring session, young children who are driven to the PEARL playschool every day, and many parents and villagers. They begin with greetings and introductions of the individual children. Then I talk about my visits since 2007 and present a book in which I have collected photos from the past years. The children are thrilled with the book, leafing through it as if it were a family album, recognising friends and relatives.

Afterwards, there are wonderful dances, and a group re-enacts a first-aid course. The atmosphere is fantastic and we can hardly tear ourselves away. A wonderful dinner awaits us at the centre, after which we soon go to bed. Even without air conditioning, I sleep very well under the mosquito net and the ceiling fan.

At dawn, I cross the river bridge into town, have a coffee and watch the hustle and bustle on the street and outside the shops. After breakfast, we meet the women who have received micro-loans in the courtyard. They show us on photo boards what they have done with the money. Afterwards, we help distribute food to a group of elderly and often sick people, before the programme with the sponsored children begins. Many children and parents have come. Individual children introduce themselves again and talk about their life stories and their prospects. Barbara, who is responsible for the sponsorships here, then gives a very heartfelt speech. Then there are more colourful and lively dances and dance games, before we sit down, somewhat weary, to yet another wonderful lunch. It is almost 3:00 pm by the time we set off, and already dark when we return to Perumalmalai.



The next morning, I decide to visit the Bodhizendo. Ama Samy founded it 30 years ago as a meditation centre. It's just over 30 minutes' walk, but the path is mostly steep. Fr. Cyril, the director of the Bodhizendo, whom I had informed by email shortly before, is already waiting for me. We talk at length about the financial situation and the relationship with the Kanzeon Zendo. Before lunch, he invites me to join the meditation session at the Zendo, which I thoroughly enjoy.

Back at the Kanzeon Zendo after tea, I have a long chat with Fr. Ama. We talk about his trip in September, which will take him first to Cincinnati and then, via several stops in Germany and Austria, to St. Ottilien. That sounds rather tiring. It's good news that they've now managed to sell the plot of land near Batlagundu, which gives them some financial breathing space and frees them from the debt burden with the builder Jeykumar.

Tuesday begins, like every day, with an early start and morning meditation. At 10:00 am, a small celebration takes place at the Montessori School. As always, there is a warm welcome and plenty of dancing. At the moment, a group of young women from France is here, running a yoga course under the guidance of an Indian woman. They are welcome guests on the programme, and on Wednesday I get to watch them enthusiastically leading the children in French singing games. A win-win for everyone.



In the afternoon, an in-depth discussion with Chitra, the manager of the Montessori School, about running costs and further plans for the Kanzeon Zendo and the school. She is optimistic that, in the end, everything will work out, as it always has.

On Wednesday, a long chat with my friend Rao, then we drive to Kodaikanal to eat dosas and end up on the terrace of the Carlton Hotel overlooking the lake with a non-alcoholic drink and some snacks. Afterwards, I'm so tired that I skip lunch, get a lift home and decide to lie down for a while instead. The banana cake Rao brought along is a big hit at afternoon tea.



After dinner, my stomach already feels a bit odd, but during the night I get terrible diarrhoea and vomiting. I've never experienced anything like it before. In the morning, I text Rao to find out if he's OK. He's fine and promises to bring me some electrolyte powder. Sonja and Martin are also taking great care of me. But when I probably get up too quickly to open the door for Rao, I briefly lose consciousness and fall, hitting the back of my head on the tiled floor. The result is a laceration on my head, and Rao struggles to get me back into bed with the help of Prakash, the manager of the Kanzeon Zendo. After I have passed a few neurological tests, everyone is a bit more reassured, but they decide to take me to Van Allen Hospital in Kodaikanal. There, I am taken straight to A&E and the wound is stapled shut, after which a CT scan is carried out at the nearby government hospital. Everything seems to be OK.

Back in my room, I'm resting. The diarrhoea has stopped, but I still feel weak. Sonja and a doctor friend of hers keep checking my pupils and aren't entirely satisfied. The next day, it is decided to take me to Leonard Hospital in Batlagundu. There, in A&E, they suggest keeping me in for 1–2 days and giving me electrolyte drips. At the same time, they want to monitor whether the head injury has caused any lasting effects. Next to me, a man who appears to have facial injuries is screaming constantly. It's all a bit dramatic. They can give me – or rather, us – a deluxe room with air conditioning, a bathroom and a TV. There's a second bed in the room for Sonja, though at 160 cm it's a bit short; my friend Ganesh will spend the first night on a plastic chair and the second night on the floor. For food, there's a cafeteria in the courtyard, from which Ganesh gets me some rice porridge.

The next morning I'm still feeling rather wobbly. It soon becomes clear that we'll have to stay another night. Sonja and Ganesh are brilliant. Sonja is well-equipped for anything and, as a nurse, keeps a critical eye on the clinic. Ganesh sorts out our meals and liaises with the clinic. Slowly, things start to improve, and the next morning, Sunday, I take my first walk through the clinic with Ganesh. The clinic makes a very well-kept impression on me. It is particularly lovely when, in the courtyard by the cafeteria, more and more mothers and one father arrive with their newborns in their arms and sit down in the morning sun.

It still takes some time before we see the doctor again, before the bills are paid and before the taxi arrives to take us back to Perumalmalai. We are back in the early afternoon and are welcomed by everyone with great joy.

No problem joining the morning meditation again the next morning. In the morning, I drive to Kodaikanal to exchange money. Everyone would like me to stay in Perumalmalai until my flight, but I think I need the two days in Madurai, Trichy and Chennai as a little break.

On the last day, another long chat with Chitra about finances, and then lots



of little goodbyes, as the next day is Wednesday and therefore

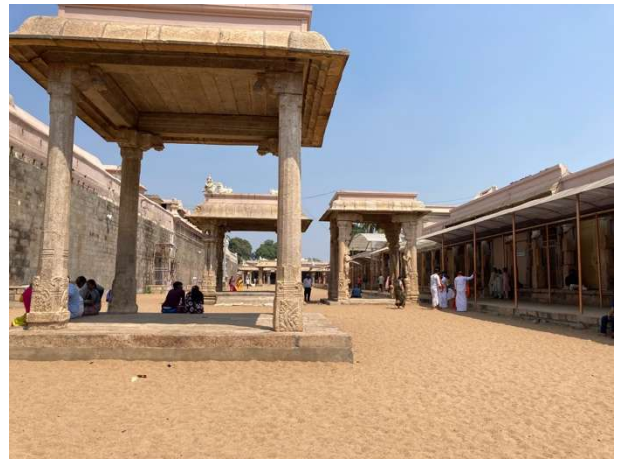
a day of silence. After tidying up and packing, Rao removes the staples from my head and Sughi, who does the bookkeeping, brings us ash from the church for our foreheads. Today is Ash Wednesday and the service was broadcast loudly for the whole village to hear (annoying!). My friend James has once again got hold of a whole bag of passion fruit, which I'm taking back to Germany with me.



After lunch, Murugan arrives and drives me to the YMCA in Madurai in his new car. I didn't get the nicest room there, but I slept well all the same. The temple is a hive of activity; renovations are taking place everywhere. The food at the Modern Restaurant is good as ever, but I'm starting to miss a bit of variety in my diet.

The next morning, I got up early and had a coffee on the street. There's always something to see. In a doorway, two men are assembling bicycles; one is lacing the spokes into the wheels, the other is fitting the frames. At 7.15 am, I took a tuk-tuk to the station. The 'MS Vande Bharat' express train arrived right on time and kept that schedule all the way to Chennai. But today I'm getting off at Trichy at 9.50 am.

I take a tuk-tuk to Srirangam, a neighbouring town with a famous temple. I drop my luggage off at my guesthouse and make my way to the temple, which is very close by. Apart from my shoes, I don't have to leave anything behind. I can take my mobile phone and rucksack with me. The atmosphere is very relaxed.



In the afternoon, I head back to Trichy to visit the famous Rock Fort. The entrance, through a narrow alley, isn't easy to find. The temple sits on an 83-metre-high rock in the middle of the city, and you can climb up to it via 400 steps. First inside the rock and finally out in the open. The view of the city is magnificent. The many visitors are enjoying the cool breeze. I take an electric tuk-tuk back to Srirangam.

Towards evening, I visit the temple in Srirangam again. A group of Asian men and women are using the temple in the evening light for a photo shoot. The women are all in magnificent saris, the men rather rough-looking and reminiscent of Kim Jong-un. As I am about to leave, I am held up by a procession in which a large, richly decorated silver bird figure is carried on a platform by many men. Leading the way is an elephant, with fireworks, music and a huge crowd of people. A great spectacle.

Glad to have escaped the crowd, I go to a restaurant and have dosa once again. A very nice conversation develops with a waiter. He is studying IT and works four hours a day without his parents' knowledge, because he has to pay off debts that his parents also know nothing about.

The next morning, after a short walk, breakfast at the guesthouse and then off to the station by tuk-tuk. The train is on time again and after 4½ hours I'm in Chennai, where a tuk-tuk soon takes me to my hotel, the Raj Park. In the afternoon, a trip to nearby Marina Beach, where people are getting ready for the evening with makeshift bars, restaurants and fairground rides. After a visit to the Kapaleeshwarar Temple and a light dinner, I was soon in bed.

The journey to the airport and check-in the next morning went without a hitch. It's hard to imagine that exactly one week later, Dubai Airport – where I'm due to board my flight to Munich – will be closed indefinitely. Even though the situation seems to be returning to normal, I was spared a lot of stress.

Despite my stay in hospital, India was once again a wonderful experience. I always felt welcome, even though the officials are strict at border control. When, two weeks later, I applied for a visa for Ama Samy's trip to Germany, I encountered the arrogant and dismissive attitude of the German embassy in India towards visitors, and I felt ashamed. Unless you book a package holiday, you need a certified invitation with proof of the host's income, health insurance and proof of the visitor's financial means, as well as a detailed itinerary with declarations from the hosts covering additional costs. Treating people as equals looks rather different.



Christian Herde, Munich, 16 March 2026