

Kanyakumari - a Spiritual Experience

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Most tourist destinations, temples, churches and other places of interest feature just one or two major things, which become the main cause for people to visit that particular location. Some other places, however, go far beyond being a mere vacation spot - a place to enjoy and sightsee.

Such is Kanyakumari, a beautiful, quaint district in South India. Presenting several tourist destinations, places of worship, national monuments and much more; this locale is far more than just a vacationer's destination. This is indeed a place to remember; a veritable spiritual experience, to appreciate and cherish for a long time to come.



Kanyakumari at Dusk - Photo Print

This month on Dolls Of India, we bring you a detailed feature on this beautiful locale called Kanyakumari, also throwing light on every aspect that makes this region more than worthy of its exalted place in the map of the world.

Kanyakumari - The District

Kanyakumari district is located in the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. Also popularly known as

Cape Comorin; the district borders with Tirunelveli, the Gulf of Mannar, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala.

Densely populated and urbanized, this city comes a close second to the metropolis of Chennai. This is also the richest district in terms of income, literacy and education.

Kanyakumari features a varied topography, with seas on three sides and mountains bordering the north. Including a multi-religious population comprising Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains, this region features a variety of art, cultures, traditions and schools of philosophical thought.

It also has a colorful history, with many great rulers and dynasties taking over its rule, such as the Pandians, the Cheras, the Cholas, the Ays and the Nayaks. Besides, this district also proudly associates itself with great sages and seers such as Agastya, Vyasa, Tolkaappiyar, Avvaiyyaar and, most importantly, Thiruvalluvar.

History

The present-day Kanyakumari was part of the old Ay kingdom during the ancient Sangam period. After the decline of this kingdom, the region became Venad, with its capital, Padmanabhapuram, located in Nagercoil. Invaded several times for its wealth, the region was in anarchy before Marthanda Varma's rule from 1729 AD. He then brought order to it, by annexing nearby kingdoms and putting an end to the feudal lords. He also established the state of Travancore, which brought the much-needed stability to the region.

Kanyakumari flourished under Marthanda Varma's able rule. Later, the Maharajas of Travancore built forts at Aramboly, in order to prevent invasion. Then, during the time of the British Rule, this area became part of the reestablished Travancore Cochin state.

Festivals

- The home to peoples coming from many religious beliefs and cultures, this district celebrates a variety of festivals. The Mandaikadu festival, celebrated in March over a ten-day period, used to be one of the major fetes.
- Today, the 9-day Navaratri Pooja is celebrated in a big way in and around Nagercoil. Devotees leave the Sushintharam temple in Nagercoil and undertake a yatra (spiritual journey) all the way to Thiruvananthapuram. The Lord Muruga from the Kumarakoil temple also accompanies his mother, Devi Parvati, throughout this yatra. This ancient tradition has been maintained since the year 1840.
- Kootalmoodu is yet another major 10-day festival. Here, devotees run to 12 Shiva temples situated around the district. The ceremony, called Shivalaya Ottam, starts one day before Shivaratri. It ends in grand fireworks, starting in the night and going on till early morning the next day.

•Besides these, festivals including the Ayya Vaikunda Avataram, Deepavali and Christmas are also celebrated with great enthusiasm by people of all communities.

Rivers and Forests

The major and minor rivers in Kanyakumari include Thamirabarani (also known as Kuzhithuriar), Valliar, the Pazhayar and the Pahrals River.

The lush forests in the district are about 75 million years old. There are 14 types of forests, ranging from tropical wet evergreen to tropical thorn forests. They are presently maintained through the Kanyakumari Forest Division. The most important timbers include teak, rosewood, vengai and aini. Besides, this is the only district in Tamil Nadu where medicinal herbs, rubber and clove plantations are maintained within the forest reserve area.

Presumably, the region has a vast and diverse fauna as well. Here, one can find at least 25 types of mammals and about 60 species of birds, several species of fishes, amphibians and reptiles.

Places of Interest

Kanyakumari boasts of several tourist destinations; the most important of which are as follows:

- The Padmanabhapuram Palace
- Chothavilai Beach
- Vattakottai Fort
- St. Xavier's Church
- Bawa Kassim Valiyullah Masjid, Elankadai
- Suchindram Temple
- The Panchappathi, five primary sacred places of Ayyavazhi
- Thiruvithamcode Arappally or Thomaiyar Kovil
- Udayagiri Fort
- Mathoor Hanging Trough, near Thiruvattar
- The Chitharal Jain Monuments
- Thiruparrapu Falls

We will bring you more details about each of these places in a later section of this article.

Tsunami

This district was one of the worst affected during the tsunami that ravaged several countries in South and South East Asia on 26 December, 2004. A tsunami memorial has been erected in order to commemorate the loss of several hundreds of lives during this unfortunate tragedy.

Kanyakumari - The Goddess

Devi Kanyakumari is the Goddess Shree Bhagavathi, in the form of an adolescent girl. She is also known as Shree Baala Bhadra, Shree Baala, Kanya Devi and Devi Kumari. Her temple is located in Cape Kanyakumari. It is believed that Sage Parashurama consecrated her temple. Considered to be very powerful, this temple pulls in scores of devotees seeking the Devi's grace.



Kanyakumari Temple - Laminated Picture

History

The worship of Devi Kanyakumari dates back to the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas. She has been mentioned in all of the above, plus the Sangam works and the Upanishads as well.

On the advice of his Guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda came here to seek her blessings in December 1892. Incidentally, she is the Goddess of Sanyasa or celibacy. Swami Brahmananda and Swami Nirmalananda, two other disciples of Paramahansa, also worshipped the Goddess. In fact, the latter even brought young girls from many parts of Kerala to worship the Bhagavathi. These seven girls later became the members of the first batch of Nuns of the Sarada Ashram.

Legend of Kanyakumari

According to mythology, there was once an asura (demon) called Bana, who ruled this land. He undertook penance to please Lord Brahma. When the latter appeared before him, he sought the boon that he would be killed only at the hands of an adolescent virgin girl.

Having gotten the boon, he was sure that he would not die. He became arrogant and wreaked

havoc on the world. He even went to Indraloka to dethrone Indra, the King of the Gods and then banished all the rest of the Devas too. The Devas then went to Goddess Parvati, requesting her to destroy the asura, and thus restore balance to the world. The Bhagavathi manifested herself in the southern tip of Aryavarta, in order to kill Bana.



Parvati - Temple Mural Poster

The adolescent Bhagavathi was immensely devoted towards Lord Shiva. The latter, pleased with her bhakti, decided that he would marry her. All the arrangements were underway for their marriage. Lord Shiva then started a journey from Suchindram for the marriage.

At that time, Sage Narada recalled that Bana could be killed only by a virgin girl. He decided that he would have to stop the Devi from getting married. The marriage muhurtham (auspicious time) was set at Brahma Muhurtham, that is, in the wee hours of the morning. Narada made the sound of a cock, thus sending the wrong information that the sun had already risen and that the Brahma Muhurtham had passed. Disappointed that the set muhurtham had passed, Shiva and his entourage returned back to Suchindram.



Narada - Photo Print

In the meantime, the poor young girl waited for her Lord to come and wed her. When he did not come, she assumed that he had rejected her. Grief-stricken and seething in pain, she destroyed everything she set her eyes on. When she finally regained her composure, she decided that she would remain a celibate for life. She then became a Sanyasin and devoted her life for penance.

Ages later, Banasura, not realizing who she actually was, tried to approach the Devi. Infuriated to be disturbed during penance, Bhagavathi took the form of the terrible Bhadrakali and effortlessly killed Bana. Moments before breathing his last, Bana realized his folly and sought forgiveness from the Devi. Bhagavathi calmed down, blessed him and maintained her presence in this place, Kanyakumari.

The Goddess, who is believed to be Lord Krishna's sister, is worshipped by women to get a good husband. Krishna's mother's brother, the evil Kamsa, killed all his sister's children immediately after their birth. The child just before Krishna's birth was a girl. Kamsa lifted the child and threw her against the wall. The aura of Devi Katyayani arose from this infant and warned Kamsa, that he would most definitely die at the hands of Krishna. Sure enough, Kamsa met his end at the hands of his own nephew, Krishna.

Iconography

The Devi is shown as a charming young girl, standing on a pedestal, holding a rosary in her right hand. There is an image of a lion in her pedestal, thus establishing her as a form of Durga. She is adorned with a sparkling nose ring, which sheds lustrous radiance. It is believed that this nose ring is so bright that it can be seen from afar in the night. According to legend, an ancient mariner once mistook the brilliance of the glinting nose ring to be a light house. He followed the light, only to be wrecked upon the rocks of Kanyakumari. In order to prevent further tragedy, the eastern door of the temple remains shut and is opened only on five special occasions throughout the year.



Kanyakumari - Laminated Board Picture

Attractions inside the Temple

- A four-pillar hall in the temple is famous because each of those pillars gives the sound of the Veena (stringed instrument), a Mridanga (percussion instrument), Venu (flute) and Jalataranga (porcelain instrument).

- Other attractions within the temple include the Pathala Ganga Teertham and the Kalabhairava Shrine. Kalabhairava is the ferocious form of Shiva, who destroyed everything after the death of his beloved Sati. The name of Kalabhairava in this temple is "Nimish" and Shakti is addressed as "Sarvani" here. There are additional shrines dedicated to Vijayasundari and Balasundari, who are friends and playmates of Devi Kanyakumari.

- The Navaratri Mandapam is yet another specialty of this temple. Here, devotees converge on a stage to display their musical and artistic abilities in order to please the Goddess.

- One can find a Sri Pada Paara, a rock in the shape of the footprint of the Devi. This is now famous as the Vivekananda Rock, where Swami Vivekananda got enlightenment.

Worship

Devi Kanyakumari is worshipped in the Keralite way. For the purpose of rituals, the Goddess is imagined as Balambika (Child Goddess). She is also considered as Devi Katyayani, one of the Nava Durgas.

Incidentally, this temple is one of the Shakti Peethas. It is believed that the spine area of Goddess Sati (or Dakshayani) had fallen here. Devi Sati had jumped into the sacrificial fire when her arrogant father refused to acknowledge or respect her husband, Lord Shiva.

A furious Shiva picked up her lifeless body and took it back to his abode. Here, Vishnu cut up the body of Sati into several pieces, using his Sudarshana Chakra (Discus). While being severed thus, each piece of the Devi's body fell in a different place on Earth, thus forming the 51 powerful Shakti Peethas.



Shiva with Sati's Corpse on
His Shoulders - Poster

New red sarees and ghee wick lamps are offered by devotees to the Goddess. Many recite the Lalita Sahasranamam while circumambulating the temple.

This place is considered extremely sacred, as it is the confluence of the three seas. It is therefore believed to be the ideal place to perform a Pitru Tarpanam (ritual to appease ancestors) and take a holy dip.

Festivals

Important festivals include the Chaitry Poornima Festival (on the full moon day in May); the 9-day Navaratri Festival; the 10-day Vaisakha Festival in May-June; and the Kalabham Festival, where the Devi is smeared in sandal paste on the last Friday of the Karkidaka Month in July-August.

The temple is open for darshan from 6.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m every day.

Vivekananda Rock Memorial

The Vivekananda Rock Memorial, which was built in 1970, in honor of Swami Vivekananda, is yet another popular tourist destination in Vavathurai, Kanyakumari. It is believed that the Swami attained enlightenment on this very rock, where the Goddess Kumari too had performed severe austerities. A vast meditation hall known as Dhyana Mandapam has been built here, for visitors to sit and meditate in its quiet environs.



Vivekananda Rock Memorial
at Kanyakumari - Photo Print

How the Memorial Came to Be

In January 1962, on the occasion of the Swami's birth centenary, some people got together to form the Kanyakumari Committee. Their aim was to build a memorial on the rock and also a pedestrian bridge leading to it. At almost the same time, the Ramakrishna Mission also planned on building the memorial.

Sadly, this was not acceptable to the Catholic fisherman community living there. They put up a huge Cross on the rock - this was big enough to be visible from the shore. This led to communal tension, with the Hindus claiming that the rock was a place of worship for them. A judicial probe followed and the Government eventually declared unequivocally that the rock was the Vivekananda Rock and that the Cross had to be removed from there. The Cross was secretly removed that night - this created further trouble and the Rock was declared a prohibited area.

Finally, the Government intervened again. This time, it declared that only a tablet could be placed on the Rock, stating that it was the Vivekananda Rock and that no memorial could be built on it.

The Role of Eknath Ranade

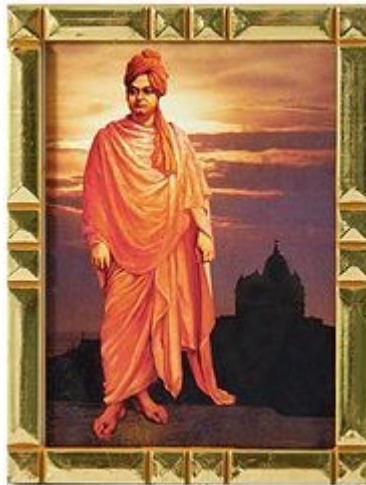
Eknath Ranade was then made the Organizing Secretary of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee. At that time, people were still against constructing the memorial, as they averred that it would mar the natural beauty of the Rock. Ranade then decided to camp in Delhi and collect signatures to support the construction of the memorial. He collected 323 signatures of the Members of Parliament and presented it before Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India. This cleared the way for the construction of the Rock Memorial.

The political hurdles finally gone; Ranade started planning the construction of the Memorial. The next obstacle was to find the necessary finance for the huge project. Ranade was sure that this would go on to become a National Monument and so, he invited every Indian to contribute to its construction. He travelled through the length and breadth of India and requested State Governments to pitch in their mite for the project. Finally, the bulk of the contributions came from the general public. Ranade launched one-rupee folders throughout India. This money was used to go ahead with the work on the Memorial.

The Vivekananda Rock Memorial was constructed in 1970, just six years after the work had commenced on building it.

The Living Memorial

The establishment of the Living Memorial or the Vivekananda Kendra, alongside the stone structure of the Rock Memorial, was suggested in 1964. It was officially founded in early January 1972 and coincided with the 108th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda.



Swami Vivekananda - Framed Picture

A saffron flag with "Om" inscribed on it was unfurled on the Rock Memorial, to mark the start of a spiritually oriented mission. This tradition was continued by young men and women, whose goal was to spread the message of the Swami across India and the world.

Vivekananda Mandapam

The large Vivekananda Mandapam comprises the following sections:

- Dhyana Mandapam - the Meditation Hall with six adjacent rooms
- Sabha Mandapam - the Assembly Hall including the Pralima Mandapam (which has the

statue), two rooms, a corridor and an open prakaram or outer courtyard

- Mukha Mandapam

- Front Entrance Steps with two rooms and a corridor below the stairs

Sripada Mandapam

This square hall comprises the following sections:

- Garbha Graham

- Inner Prakaram

- Outer Prakaram

- Outer Platform

Both of the above-mentioned Mandapams are designed in a way that the vision of Vivekananda in the statue would be seen directed towards the Shripadam. The Sri Padaparai Mandapam is a shrine erected at the spot where the footprint of the Virgin Goddess Kumari is seen on the Rock.

Thiruvalluvar Statue

The Thiruvalluvar Statue, also referred to as the Valluvar Statue, is a stone sculpture of the Tamil poet and philosopher; also the author of the Thirukkural. Sculpted by Dr. V.Ganapathi Sthapati, it stands 133 feet tall, including the height of the pedestal. The sculpture itself is 95 feet high and weighs 7000 tons.



Thiruvalluvar Statue, Kanyakumari

Laminated Picture

The 38-foot pedestal represents the 38 chapters of Virtue, the first of the three books of the Thirukkural text. The statue represents the second and third books, namely, Wealth and Love. Thus, the entire design indicates that one can earn wealth and love based on just pure virtue.

The right hand of the statue has three fingers pointing up. This signifies the three cantos of the text, namely, Aram, Porul and Inbam (again, Virtue, Wealth and Love). The statue's head stands 200 feet above sea level. Juxtaposed beside the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, this statue is built in conformation with traditional Indian architecture.

Construction

The statue project was initially conceived by M.Karunanidhi in December 1975. In April 1979, Morarji Desai, the then Prime Minister, laid the foundation stone for the construction of the structure, in the presence of the then Chief Minister, M.G.Ramachandran.

However, the actual sculpting work began a decade later, in 1990. The tiny island adjacent to the Rock Memorial was decided to be the ideal location for the statue. Sthapati was chosen to oversee the project. Stone, being far more durable than metal, was deemed to be the ideal material for building the statue. The project stalled again, but then got back on track in 1997. Finally, at the cost of US\$1 million, the project employed 150 workers, who toiled for almost 16 hours each day to complete the structure.

The statue has a slight bend around the waist in keeping with traditional architecture of the time. However, the issue was tackled in time, thanks to advance planning and clever implementation of ideas. A full-length wooden prototype was created before construction. This led to the identification of an energy line, known as Vastu. There is currently an empty cavity, which runs through the center of the statue, from top to bottom.



Thiruvalluvar Papier Mache Statue

The work was divided amongst three workshops, in Kanyakumari, Ambasamudram and Sholinganallur. Interestingly, the 19-foot-high face, with the nose, eyes, ears, mouth, forehead and so on, were hand-carved using individual stones.

Installation

Finally, the statue was installed on its pedestal on October 19, 1999 and was unveiled on the millennium day of January 01, 2000. More than 50,000 people gathered to witness the mega event and people took to the streets to rally for what the Chief Minister called the "beacon of light to guide human life for all time to come".

Though this impressive structure was severely lashed by the tsunami in December 2004, it stood unaffected and triumphant above all of nature's fury. Incidentally, it is also designed to withstand earthquakes of great magnitude, occurring within 100 kilometers.

In order to prevent the statue from erosion, it is regularly treated with chemicals once in every four years. The salty deposits in every joint are removed and replaced with new cement. Paper pulp is then applied to the statue in order for it to completely absorb the salty deposits.

Access

The Thiruvalluvar Statue can be accessed by ferry - these services are available from the mainland. The ferry service to the Vivekananda Rock Memorial stops for a while at this statue as well. There is the possibility of a connecting bridge to be built in the near future, connecting the Rock Memorial and the statue.

Gandhi Mandapam

The Gandhi Mandapam is a memorial to Mahatma Gandhiji, who had visited Kanyakumari in 1925 and 1937. It is located near the Kumari Amman Temple, where a portion of his ashes were kept for public darshan, just before they were immersed in the sea on February 12, 1948. Completed in 1956, it is 79 feet high, to mark the age of the Mahatma.



Mahatma Gandhi - Poster

Built in Orissa-style architecture, it is designed in such a way that, on his birthday (October 2nd) every year, the rays of the sun fall exactly in the place that the urn was kept. The structure has a hole in the roof - the sun's rays enter the mandapam through this hole and fall on the exact location.

While there are a great many memorial structures all over the country, to honor the life and times of various leaders, the Gandhi Mandapam is unique, as it harnesses the energy of the Sun to honor the Father of the Nation.

Triveni Sangamam

The Trisagara Sangamam or the Triveni Sangamam as it is commonly referred to, is one more thing that makes Kanyakumari a unique location. Beaches are always a wonderful sight to behold. However, the Kanyakumari beach deserves special mention, because this offers you a one-of-its-kind view of the three seas meeting together.

Assuming that you are standing looking at the beach, the Arabian Sea is at your right, the Bay of Bengal comes from your left and the Indian Ocean is right in front. This is why this location is named Triveni Sangam (the confluence of the Three Seas).

At this location, the waves of all the three mighty oceans mix with each other and fall apart. One can actually distinguish the three seas by their difference in color, with the naked eye. This characteristic makes the Triveni Sangam a sacred place - several people take a dip in these waters, seeking to wash off their sins in the sacred waters.

Other Major Attractions of Kanyakumari

1. Kanyakumari Beach

Major attractions in the Kanyakumari beach are the sunrise and the sunset. You can view these

standing anywhere at all on the beach. However, the sunrise point, the sunset point and the view from the tower gives you the best experience of these phenomena.



Sunrise at Kanyakumari - Photo Print

2. Vattakottai Fort

The Vattakottai Fort is a circular fort, located about 6km to the northeast of Kanyakumari town, in Agateeswaram Taluk. Built in the 18th century, this was the last one constructed by the Travancore rulers. A clear view of the sea is available from the raised parade ground atop the fort.

3. Padmanabhapuram Palace

This is located in the Padmanabhapuram village in Kanyakumari. Rated among the top ten palaces in the world, this was once the capital of the Travancore rulers. Spread over 6 acres of land and situated at the foot of Veli Hills, this is mostly a wooden structure, built in Kerala style. Today, this beautiful palace is being maintained by the Archeological Department of Kerala.

4. Mathoor Hanging Bridge

The Mathoor Hanging Bridge, also called the Hanging Trough or Aqueduct, is situated in Aruvikkarai village in Kanyakumari district. Considered to be the longest and tallest aqueduct in Asia, this 1km bridge was constructed in 1966 and spans across the River Parazhiyar (Pahralli). This structure also comprises a children's park, view tower and other facilities.

5. Sri Sthanumalayan Temple

The Sri Sthanumalayan Temple, also known as Arulmigu Thanumaliya Perumal Temple, is the only one of its kind where the Trinity is worshipped in the same sanctum sanctorum. The singular lingam here represents the Trinity. This ancient temple is located in Suchindram, which is about 11km away from Kanyakumari.

6. St. Xavier Church

Built by St. Francis Xavier in the 1600s, this is yet another major tourist destination in Kanyakumari. Renovated several times in all these years, there is now also a grotto for St. Mary and a minor shrine for St. Ignatius at the same premises.

7. Thiruparrapu Falls

Another popular tourist destination in Kanyakumari, these falls merge into the River Kothai from a height of about 15 meters. The rocky riverbed of the Thiruparrapu Waterfalls is about 300 meters long. These waterfalls continue to delight visitors for almost seven months in a year. This place also includes a shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva, plus various entertainment activities for visitors and children.

8. Kamarajar Manimandapam

This is a tribute to honor Sri Kamarajar, a freedom fighter and veteran political leader of Tamil Nadu. The President of the Indian National Congress before Independence, he played a pivotal role in shaping the politics of India; particularly of Tamil Nadu. This structure is located close to Gandhi Mandapam; on the same site where his ashes were kept for public display before they were immersed in the sea.

9. Thirunanthikarai Cave Temple

Situated in Thiruparrapu Panchayat of the Kanyakumari district, this is a popular pilgrim destination. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, it is considered as the fourth temple of Shivalyam. It is built in Kerala style and there is also a shrine of Vishnu, facing Shiva. This cave temple is believed to be built between the 7th and 8th centuries, by Jains.

10. Pechiparai Reservoir

One of the major tourist attractions of Kanyakumari, this reservoir was built during the rule of Maharaja Sri Moolam Thirunal, across the River Kodayar. It is about 425 meters long and has a catchment area of over 200 sq km. The dense forests surrounding this reservoir are a natural habitat for diverse wildlife. There is a camp shed on one side of the Reservoir.

11. Government Museum

Located on Beach Road, this Museum was established in 1991. It includes a vast collection of exhibits, related to archaeology, numismatics, anthropology, botany, zoology, artifacts, crafts and much more.

12. Wax Museum

The Wax Museum in Kanyakumari is located in the city of Baywatch. Boasting of a good collection of life-like figures of many famous figures related to Indian history as well as the world's history, it bears close resemblance to the Madame Tussauds Museum in London.

13. Chitharal Jain Monuments

The Chitharal Jain Monuments, also known as Chitharal Malai Kovil (literally, "Temple on the Hill") and Chitharal Cave Temple, can be found near Chitharal village in Kanyakumari district. The Chitharal Hills are locally called the Chokkanthoongi Hills. Here, one can find two monuments. The earlier one features rock-cut structures of beads with inscriptions and drip-ledges. A natural cavern formed by overhanging rock features bas-relief sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras - these were carved later on. The central sanctum has a carving of Mahavira, with a Chhatratrayi Chaitya, a three-tiered parasol. All major niches have flying figures of the Vidyharas and each of these figures has an inscription of the name and place of the donor in Vatteluthu Tamil script. Today, these monuments are protected and maintained by the Thrissur Circle of Archeological Survey of India.

Kanyakumari features much more in terms of sightseeing, shopping and spirituality. In case you intend to visit this region, do plan a long enough stay to experience all that this unique destination has to offer.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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