

## Chithrai Festival

The Chithrai festival in Madurai is among the world's longest annual celebrations (lasts for about two weeks). It is celebrated in an attempt to unite the Vishnavites and the Shaivites. It does so by re-enacting the wedding of Lord Sundareswarar (Lord Shiva) and Goddess Meenakshi (Lord Vishnu's sister).

Held in the famous Meenakshi Temple, it is a festival that has been celebrated since ancient times, it has never failed to attract the attention of both national and international tourists. If a trip to Madurai is on the cards, check out these fascinating facts about the festival.

Calendar of Events for 2017		Calendar of Events for 2018	
Chithrai festival starts on April 29, 2017		Chithrai festival starts on April 19, 2018	
May 4, 2017	Coronation of Meenakshi	April 24, 2018	Coronation of Meenakshi
May 5, 2017	Thikvijayam	April 25, 2018	Thikvijayam
May 6, 2017	Meenakshi Celestial Wedding	April 26, 2018	Meenakshi Celestial Wedding
May 7, 2017	Car Festival	April 27, 2018	Car Festival
May 10, 2017	Azhagar entering River Vaigai	April 30, 2018	Azhagar entering River Vaigai

### Special Arrangement for visiting Foreigners

Tamil Nadu Tourism department, Temple authorities, Police Department, local Government authorities and Travel Club - Madurai have jointly been making special arrangements for foreign visitors. Special passes and enclosure are provided inside the celestial wedding venue for foreigners to sit and watch the entire wedding. Similarly, arrangements are also made for them to witness the huge cars being pulled and turned 90\* during the car festival that is on the day after the wedding. They can also witness the Azhagar entering the river from the top of a bridge. A member of Travel Club and Tamilnadu Tourism Department (TTD) escorts the visitors from TTD office to the various venues on each day.

## **A Four Hundred Year Old Festival**

The heart of Madurai is the chosen location for this festival, which has been celebrated since a long time ago. History has it that this festival dates back four hundred centuries. Since then it has been a crowd puller and still is. Lakhs of people gather here to celebrate this occasion. It is wonderful to be a part of a historically significant festival. Earlier the festival was celebrated in Sholavandan, but then King Thirumalai Naykar, changed the place of celebrations to Madurai.

## **Worshippers Arrive At the Location in Bullock Carts**

You will come across old black and white pictures of the Chithrai festival where people would come to Madurai from neighboring villages in bullock carts to worship. Till recently, villagers would pack food, pots and pans, hay for the bulls and come to Madurai and camp in any open space. Today, villagers come in trucks, tractor-trailers and buses for the festival.

## **Two different Festivals: Meenakshi and Alagar**

Historically speaking, originally there used to be two different festivals namely the Meenakshi festival and the Alagar festival. They were celebrated in two different months. The Shaivites celebrated the Meenakshi festival. It is believed that Meenakshi was the daughter of the Pandya king who was also another avatar of Goddess Sakthi, the wife of Lord Shiva. She was born out of the fire and grew up to become a fearless warrior. After conquering the world she attacked Kailayam where Shiva lived, but fell in love with him. Both married and ruled the Pandya kingdom from then on.

The Vaishnavites believed that there was an ascetic named Mandooka rishi who was once bathing in the holy waters of the Alagar Hills when Durvasar Maharishi, a powerful and short-tempered rishi, entered. On finding Mandooka Rishi not welcoming him properly, cursed him to become a frog. To revive from the curse Mandoorka travels to the river Vaigai where Vishnu blesses him and revives him. This is enacted every year in the river Vaigai.

## **Merging of the two festivals by King Thirumalai Naykar**

King Thirumalai Naykar was the one who shifted the festival to Madurai, but the biggest achievement was to unite the followers of Shiva and Vishnu under the umbrella of a festival, which would celebrate both the Gods and Goddesses believed by each. Since then on, it has been celebrated as one big long festival, which takes place every year during the Tamil month of Chithrai. The name therefore changed to Chithrai Tiruvizha after its transformation.

## **A List of Events at the Festival**

The Chithrai Festival being a long affair, includes several events. First is the Kodi Yetram. The chief priest of the Meenakshi temple hoists a flag, which marks the beginning of the festival. Next is the Pattabisekam – a coronation ceremony for the goddess Meenakshi. After this is the Dikvijayam where Meenakshi goes in all direction waging war and winning them all. This is followed by the Meenakshi Tirukalyanam or wedding. This the celebration of the love affair and the marriage of Meenakshi with Shiva. The festival is celebrated with immense excitement and the zeal of a real wedding. The celebrations spread out all over the city and the streets remain crowded with devotees. The wedding is followed by a grand banquet for thousands of people with food being prepared and served by volunteers.

Next is Ther Thiruvizha, or car festival where people pull two decorated huge chariots, one for Lord Shiva and another for Goddess Meenakshi. Every evening during the festival, Lord Shiva and Goddess Meenakshi are taken in procession in different vaganas on the four streets around the temple. As the procession passes through the streets, devotees put forward offerings of flowers, coconuts, camphor and incense sticks. Fairs and trade exhibitions are also organized on this occasion. The festival attracts a massive crowd every year.

This is followed by Ethir Sevai and the event of Alagar entering the River Vaigai. This festival lasts for seven days from the time the deity leaves Azhagar Temple (25km from Madurai) and returns . With this the festival ends.