

10 YEARS OF INCREDIBLE JOURNEYS



OUTLOOK

traveller

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KERALA

The state on a shoestring

BUDGET HOTEL BOOM

Value for money, at last

BUDGET HOLIDAYS

SOFT ADVENTURE

Ladakh

THE LIST
50
CHEAP
HOLIDAYS

The backwaters
near Alleppey

SOMEWHERE ELSE?

Patan

ALEXANDER FRATER ■ CYRUS BROACHA ■ CHETTINAD ■ AUTOMOBILSSOMMER 2011

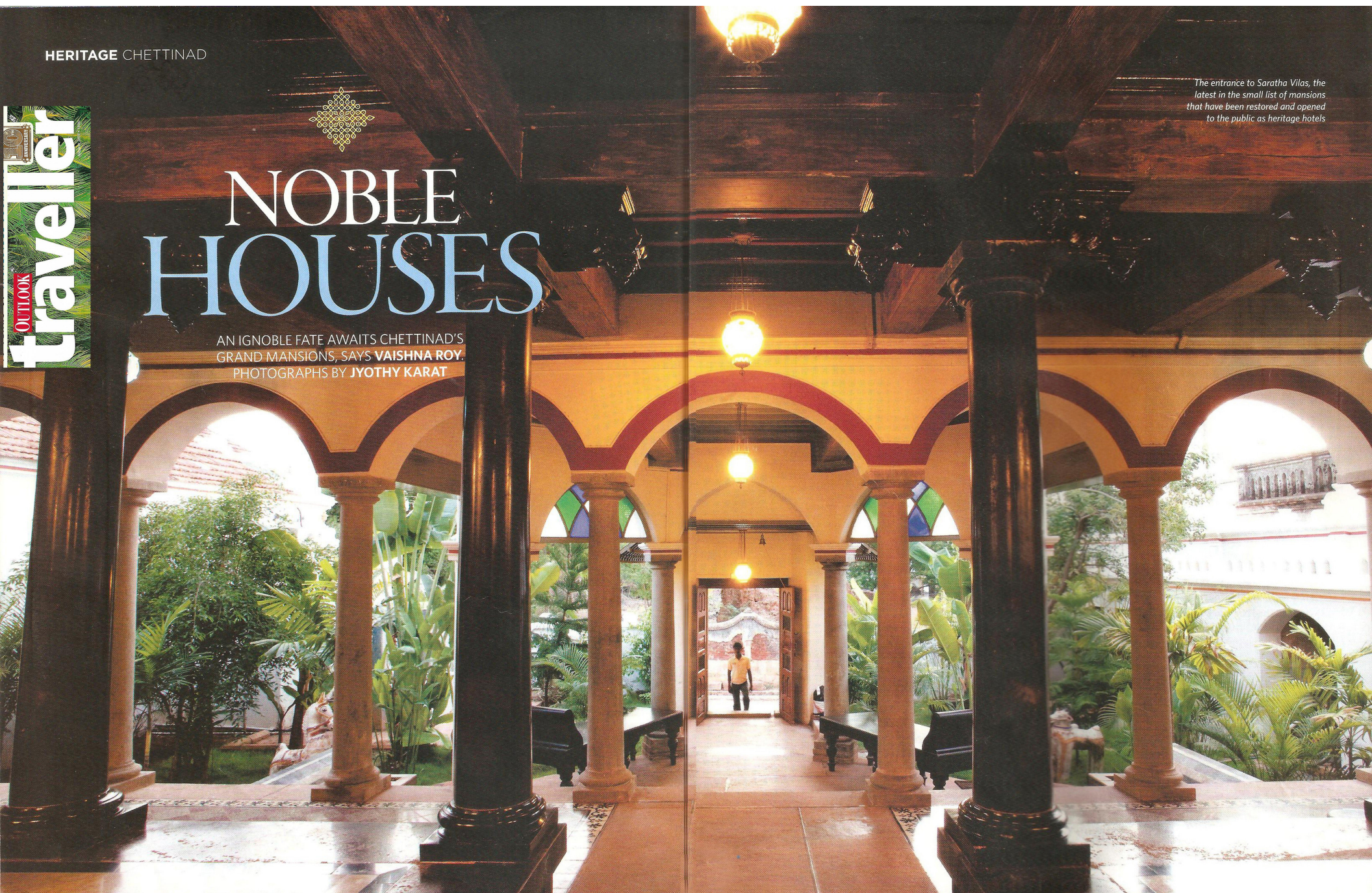
HERITAGE CHETTINAD

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NOBLE HOUSES

AN IGNOBLE FATE AWAITS CHETTINAD'S
GRAND MANSIONS, SAYS **VAISHNA ROY**.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JYOTHY KARAT**

The entrance to Saratha Vilas, the latest in the small list of mansions that have been restored and opened to the public as heritage hotels



CHETTINAD

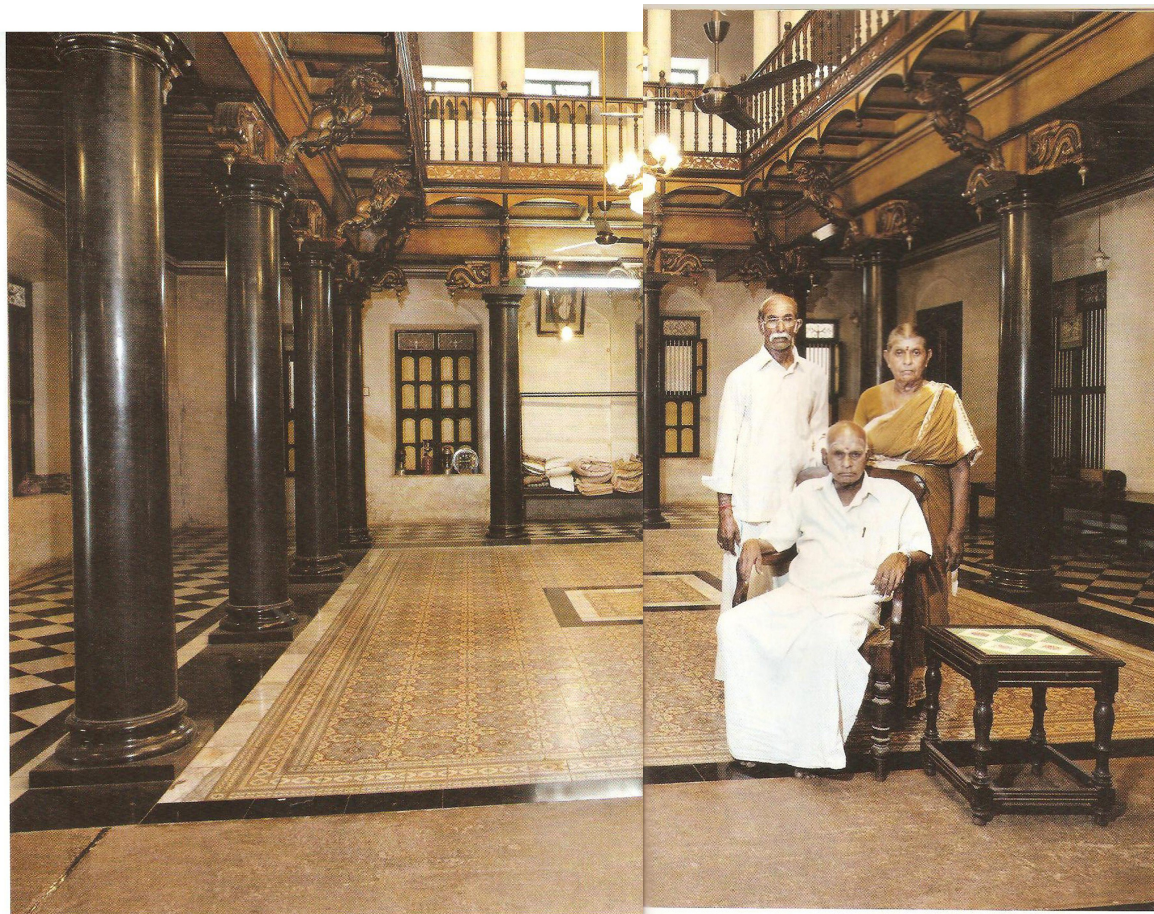
WHEN I FINALLY ARRIVED, after considerable trouble, in Kothamangalam in the heart of Chettiar country it was 2.30 in the morning. Not even a street dog was to be seen anywhere in the tiny village. The cab drove down quiet, shadowy lanes and came to a stop in front of a largish house with high walls. I had a moment's misgiving as I walked up a short flight of stairs and tugged at the old-fashioned bell-pull. But within minutes, a man came running to let me in. As soon as I stepped into the garden and looked up at the veranda and the great carved front door, the memories came flooding back. It was a quintessential Chettinad mansion all right and, even in the half-light, I could see it was as beautiful as they come.

The next morning would show me just how beautiful Saratha Vilas was, when I stepped out from my room into the slatted sunlight of the first courtyard to join my hosts and others for coffee. But although I found myself exclaiming at every carved pillar and rafter, every gorgeous floor tile and satin-smooth wall, the truth is I had not really expected anything else. The grandeur of the Chettinad mansions and the almost greedy accumulation of the best and the beautiful within this bunch of villages deep inside Tamil Nadu has been admired many times over since their discovery by tourism a decade or so ago. However, a decade or so down the line, we're poised on the brink of another discovery: that we are quite sure of losing it all and quickly, if nothing is done to conserve this stunning piece of history.

Only last month, Unesco's World Heritage Committee had been meeting in Paris to debate the inclusion of the latest nominations to its list of 911 cultural and natural heritages across the globe. If Chettinad and its historical mansions can get the coveted World Heritage Site tag, it will mean two significant things: one, funding and, two, a conservation plan. The problem: Chettinad is not even close to being nominated, leave alone making it to the list.

This story actually starts many months ago, at a dinner party hosted by Lydie, a charming Belgian chef who has made Chennai her home. Over coffee and baklava, I met Bernard and Michel, and discovered that they had just finished converting a Chettinad mansion into a heritage resort. And thus, from that evening to this morning at Saratha Vilas, the exquisite

Clockwise from top left: the owners at home in CVC House; Chidambara Vilas; a room in Chettinadu Mansion; The Bangala; and inside Visalam



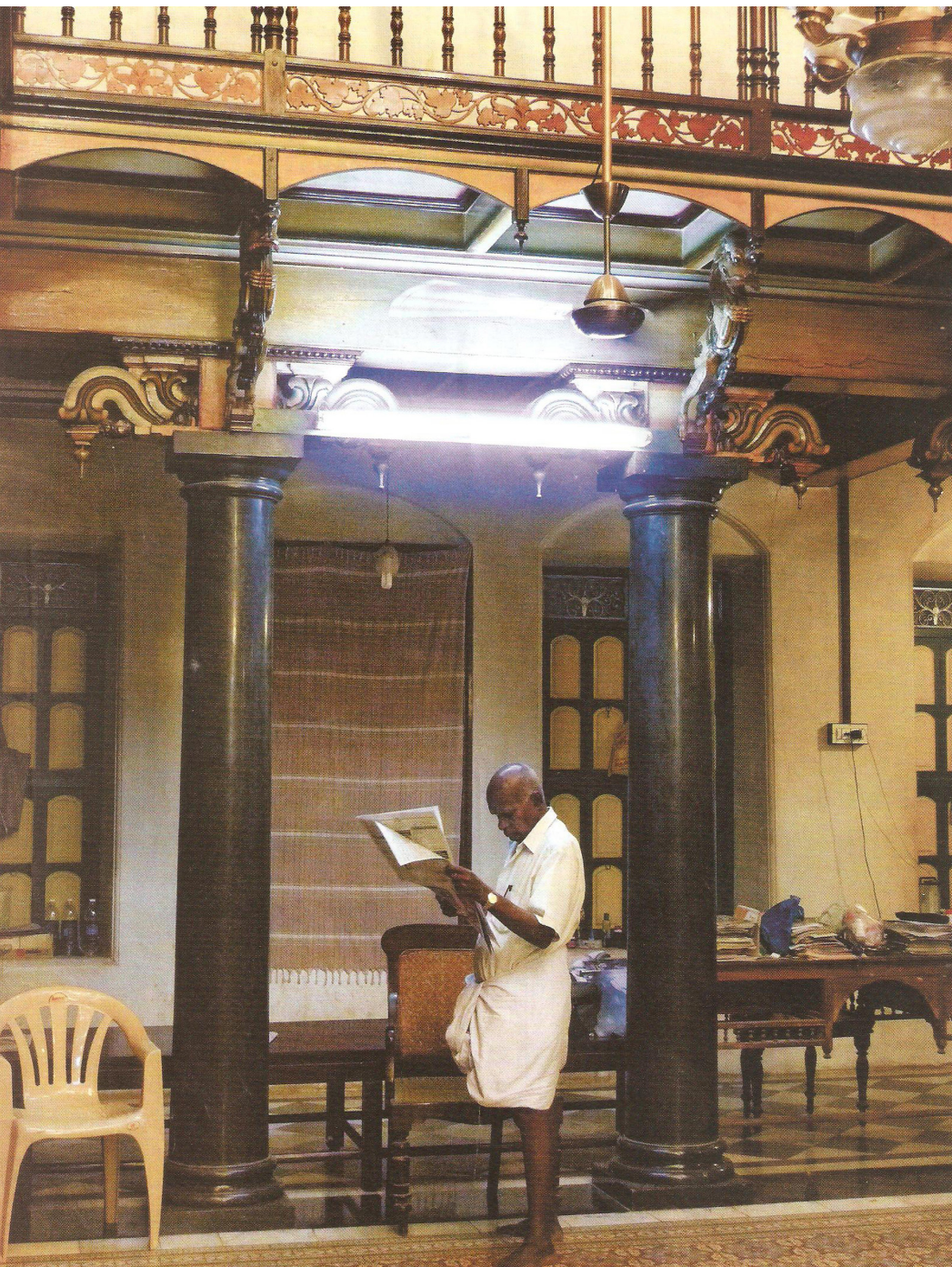
Five mansions have been converted into hotels, and it's a good conservation plan to begin with. But it's hardly enough

mansion built by S.A.S. Subramanian Chettiar in 1905. With the mind-boggling wealth he accumulated as a merchant in Malacca, this man—like many of his kinsmen—built a palatial home in his native village, lovingly embellishing it with Burmese teak and Japanese tiles, Italian marble and Belgian glass.

Between 1850 and 1940,

the Chettiars, aka 'the official money-lenders of the Empire', were at the pinnacle of their gloriously rich careers. Making money all over Southeast Asia, they shipped home their tremendous wealth where it was reshaped into fabulous family manors that dotted the entire landscape of the region. However, at the peak of their success, World War





II broke out. The British imperial government requisitioned all foreign companies engaged in any form of commerce, and the Chettiers were forced to return home empty-handed.

Sivagangai district, the heartland of Chettiar country, is relentlessly hot and dry and an impossible place to make money. So, although the Chettiers built their homes there, the families moved out in droves to find their fortune in other, more conducive climes. And the result is this: a land of ghost towns. Streets and streets lined with extravagant homes, each competing with the next in grandeur, but now just faded shells of their former selves. To the visitor, the impact is quite stunning. Here you are driving into what looks like any another small South Indian town, you turn a corner and enter a Chettiar neighbourhood, and suddenly it's like stepping back in history. Beautifully laid-out streets, quite deserted (what Indian town is empty of people?) and row upon row of fantastic houses, with turrets and gargoyles and patios and driveways.

IT IS QUITE UNIQUE. And that is what draws the attention of architecture aficionados like Bernard and Michel, who discovered it a few years ago when on vacation in India. They fell so deeply in love with what they saw that they gave up their professions and homes and made it their mission to establish a conservation plan for Chettinad.

That was, of course, easier said than done. To start with, they did what a few other Chettiar families have also done: converted a mansion into a tourist resort. One of the earliest to do this was the Meyyappan family, who reinvented the family clubhouse as 'The Bangala'. Today, there are about five such converted heritage homes (see 'The Information'), and it's a good conservation plan to begin with. But it's hardly enough, for an area of about 1,550 sq km and some seventy-five villages—where a third of the original buildings have already been lost, destroyed by either time or demolition. Of the remaining, a mere tenth or less continue to be maintained by the owner-families. The rest simply stand, abandoned or disintegrating, and deeply endangered.

Globally, sites qualify for 'world heritage' status when they are seen as being of 'outstanding universal value', either culturally or as natural heritage. Here in Chettinad is an entire homogenous region developed by a Tamil trad-

*Facing page:
inside the grand
CVC House.
Below: the
water tank near
the palace in
Kanadukathan*

ing community with vaulting ambition—a region that displays a unique architectural pastiche, surprising ecological sensibilities and sophisticated urban planning.

The architectural framework is clearly Tamil—the internal open courtyard, outside bench or *thinnai*, the tiled roof, the arrangement of the family rooms around the central courtyard. But the Tamil structure seamlessly matches up with imported elements like Roman pillars and columns, cast iron balustrades and Italian marble floors. The region has superb architectural innovations, such as the famous egg-white and lime mixture for the walls that leaves them like silk or the equally famous Athangudi floor tiles. All the homes have stormwater drains that are connected by a complex network to the village *oorani* or *erri* (tank and pond) where it serves the community. The

houses all lie on an east-west axis, allowing shadows, coolness and breezes in. The walls are of brick and lime plaster and the roofs use terracotta, both perfect for coolness.

When it came to urban planning, the well-travelled Chettiers brought sophistication to their hometown with a perfect urban grid and streets in orthogonal layouts. In Kanadukathan, for instance, a highly evolved plan can be seen, where the Raja's palace, the main temple and the railway station all lie within this grid.

By some freak of history, the region has stayed frozen in time, which should make it that much easier to isolate and conserve. But this opportunity is not merely being wasted but is being abused. Newer buildings block the drainage system lining the streets, and for the first time streets are getting flooded during the rains. New 'heritage' resorts have sprung



*The region has stayed frozen in time,
which should have made it that much
easier to isolate and conserve*





up, built on a north-south axis, right next to elegant Chettinad mansions. Then there are the ill-informed attempts at conservation. In one heritage resort I visited the beautiful original walls had been freshly painted over with green and yellow flowers.

The reason for these solecisms is not far to find. It lies simply in ignorance of the fact that this is a valuable heritage zone. The challenge, first, for any conservation attempt will be to sensitise the local stakeholders and make them aware and proud of what they own and what they are a part of. Private efforts are many: the Rajas of Chettinad have opened their Kanadukathan house to the public as a museum. The M. Rm. Rm. Cultural Foundation founded

The orthogonal layout of Kanadukathan; the Shiva temple in the town centre; a chandelier in the main hall at Saratha Vilas; and M. Solachi, the owner of Saratha Vilas

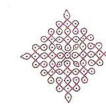
by Visalakshi Ramaswamy actively organises the renewal of arts and crafts of the region. In Pallathur, home to the Murugappa industrialist family, Tamil films are shot frequently, making it a good source of revenue. But clearly, the money is not being pumped back into maintenance or any major initiative.

ALSO STAYING at Saratha Vilas is Minja Yang, cultural heritage management consultant from

Japan and former director of Unesco, New Delhi. Says Yang, "Chettinad's rich history, its socio-economic past, the inter-cultural dialogue it represents, its urban planning... all this makes it valuable. Such examples must be preserved for future generations." Yang has now joined forces with the two Frenchmen, other conservationists both Indian and global, and Unesco itself to initiate a conservation plan. Bernard and Michel themselves, as co-founders of the

Tamil Nadu-based ArcHe-S (Architectural Heritage Safeguard), have joined with Unesco to launch the Revive Chettinad Heritage Campaign (RCHC) with the support of the state government, Anna University and local Chettiar families. The idea was to use RCHC to map the region, identify endangered sites and draw up a sustainable restoration programme.

It was during this initiative that they managed to rope in Region Centre, a district in France that has done fantastic stuff with heritage projects. I meet Senator Yves Dauge from Region Centre, who is also advisor to the Unesco World Heritage Centre. Says Dauge: "Our priority is to engage with local authorities and frame a local policy to save these villages.



The Chettiars brought sophistication to their hometown with a perfect urban grid and streets in orthogonal layouts

For this we first need a survey, which will be the tool to manage the protection." The local administration of Region Centre has already financed a pilot study that mapped nine villages in 2009. According to Dauge, a full-fledged survey is also necessary; the project would involve Indian archi-

tecs, conservation specialists, urban planners and heritage experts. This process is likely to take at least three years. Then, a methodology could be drawn up, and an action plan drafted along with the local government. "Chettinad could make it to the World Heritage list, but for this, Unesco needs

CHETTINAD



to see an action plan," says Dange.

Within the state and within the region, however, apathy reigns. Way back in 2007, a Unesco mission met the chief secretary of Tamil Nadu and it was decided at the meeting that the Central Antiquities Act (which only recognises articles, objects or buildings as antiquities if they are over 100 years old) would be re-examined, the entire Chettinad region declared a Heritage Zone, a tourist office started in Karaikudi by the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) and an Eco Museum and Heritage Centre set up there.

In 2011, I see none of the above. What I do see are signs of an aborted TTDC boating project in a village pond that is all of 150 feet in circumference. Yes, boating, in semi-arid Kanadukathan in a tiny village pond used for bathing and washing. Just next to the pond is a huge and expensive-looking lighting tower. And that's it.

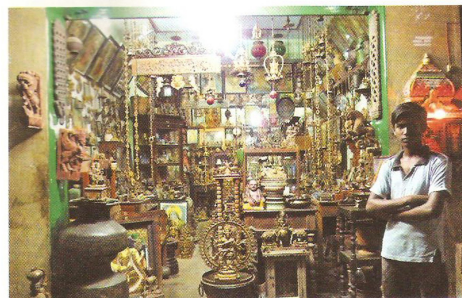


The king's waiting room adjoining the old railway station; and (left) a mansion in Pallathur

Still, a trip to Chettinad continues to be fascinating. I love walking along the streets and picking up conversations with old retainers and ancient family members who have been left behind to hold the fort. I love browsing in the antique shops for Swedish

enamelware and Burmese lacquer boxes. I love the beauty and the solitude. But always there is a lurking feeling of loss and of waste, of knowing that without proactive conservation, we might be among the last generations to enjoy these streets.

THE INFORMATION



An antique shop in Karaikudi, packed with relics from abandoned homes

GETTING THERE

BY AIR Madurai (85km) and Trichy (92km) are the nearest airports. Madurai in particular is well connected on several airlines to Chennai (from ₹1,800 on SpiceJet) and Bengaluru (from ₹3,900 on Kingfisher Red). BY TRAIN The overnight Rameswaram Express runs daily between Chennai Egmore and Karaikudi (₹760 on 2A). The Mayiladuturai Express connects Bangalore City Junction with Trichy (₹691 on 2A). BY ROAD Chettinad is approximately

seven hours by road from Bengaluru or Chennai. From Bengaluru, take the Krishnagiri-Salem-Trichy route. From Chennai, take NH-45 to Trichy, and then NH-210.

WHERE TO STAY

There's now a reasonable number of options in Chettinad, but the accommodation of choice for the visitor interested in the region's heritage should of course be the Chettiar mansions-turned-hotels. The Bangala in Karaikudi, which opened a little over ten years

ago, is the pioneer in this field and continues to offer gracious hospitality and excellent Chettinad food (₹4,700-5,650 doubles; 04565-220221, thebangala.com).

Saratha Vilas, also in Karaikudi, is the newest to join the small list of lovely heritage hotels (₹5,200-6,800 doubles, including breakfast; 9884203175, 9884936158, sarathavilas.com). The CGH Earth group has an outstanding record in the business of running heritage hotels in Kerala; their Visalam in Kanadukathan keeps the tradition going (₹5,880 doubles, including breakfast; 273301, cgearth.com). South India-based chain, Sangam Hotels, opened Chidambaram Vilas in Kadiapatti recently (₹12,000-15,000 doubles, including breakfast; 0452-4244524, 4244555, chidambaravilas.com). And then there's Chettinadu Mansion in Kanadukathan, the second home in the region to be converted into a hotel (₹5,200 doubles, including breakfast; 04565-273080, chettinadumansion.com).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> ATHANGUDI Visit the home of the famous Athangudi tiles to see

how the beautiful terracotta tiles are patterned and sun-dried. They say the local sand is the secret behind the texture.

> PILLAIYARPATTI The fifth-century Karpaga Vinayakar temple here is the most famous of the nine Chettinad clan temples with a six-foot-high stone Ganesha.

> DEVAKOTTAI Famous for Devakottai chicken, the streets are lined with mansions, the most famous being Periya Minor's vedu, complete with Spanish tiled roof, Italian floors and teak pillars.

> KANADUKATHAN Most evolved urban grid, with the Raja of Chettinad's palace, the railway station with the Raja's special waiting room and the town centre with temple and tank.

> THIRUMAYAM There's a gorgeous giant sleeping Vishnu carved out of the black cliff wall here. Actually, the entire temple is carved into the cliff, alongside the ancient fort here.

> KARAUKUDI Famous for the Bangala hotel, the antique shops and the textile shops selling the famous Chettinad handloom weaves are big attractions too.

■ VAISHNA RAO