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June 2012

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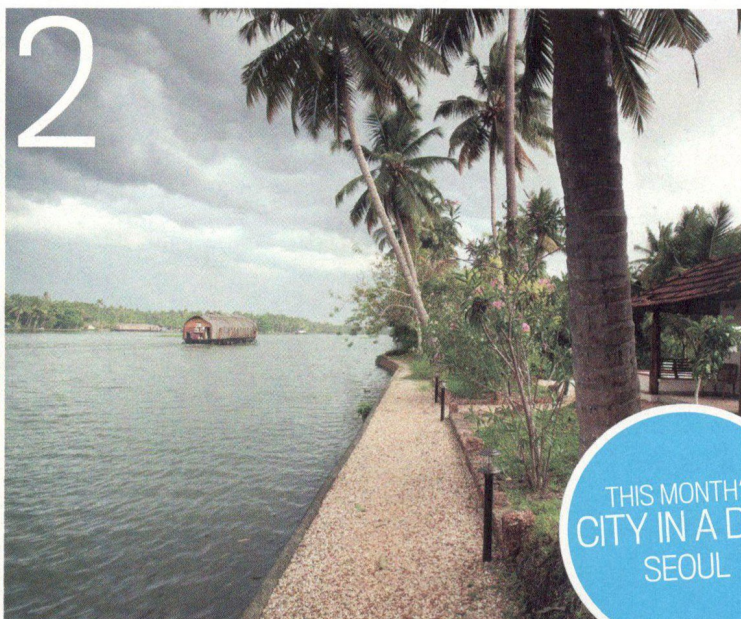
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5 EASY
WEEKEND TRIPS
PACK UP AND GO!



THIS MONTH'S
CITY IN A DAY:
SEOUL

5 EASY TRIPS

YOU CAN DO NOW

Marvel at architectural excesses in Chettinad, eat till you drop at Vembanad, go non-veg in Ahmedabad, chill out in the Himalayas and scale the peaks from Bhandardara





The central courtyard
brings light and air into
Saratha Vilas

Saratha Vilas, Chettinad, Tamil Nadu

COURT THE REGAL LIFE

If you've ever dreamt about living like a king, there is a place just two hours from Tiruchirapalli that will live up to your imaginings. The drive through dusty flatlands out to the province is not encouraging, but 10 kilometres before your destination, a fort rises up from the rocks. And everything changes when you round that corner. The road narrows, buildings close in on both sides. Saratha Vilas is on a street just like any other. It is only when you get past the massive teak

door that you realise you've come into a kingdom.

Ring the ancient brass bell gives you admittance onto a verandah held up by impossibly large teak pillars, and then into a hall that seems to serve no purpose other than to convey a sense of overwhelming space, with ceilings towering a good nine metres above you and marble flooring stretching forever. The inner courtyard, supported by delicately carved pillars, is as wide as the hall is high. No street sounds are allowed past the foot-thick door

into this private domain. Saratha Vilas, set in a 34,500sqft property, was built in 1905 by Tiru SAS Subramanian Chettiar, a wealthy merchant who had his headquarters in Malacca in Malaysia. This is the kingdom of a man who built his own castle and indulged his every whim as he did so. His grandiose vision is seen not just in the Vaastu Shastra-ordained layout, or the scale, or even in the architecture that is a unique blend of traditional Hindu-Tamil and Italianate influences; it lies in the carved wooden doors

brought here from Kerala, the marble floors imported from Italy, the tiles from Japan, the glass chandeliers from Belgium, the lacquered boxes from Burma... And Saratha Vilas is just one in a league of mansions.

The Chettiars were a clan of merchant princes, who brought their wealth back to their ancestral land, making this region the centre of a trading empire. Their dream run ended when the British left India, but the substance of their fantasies still stands, just needing some love and attention.



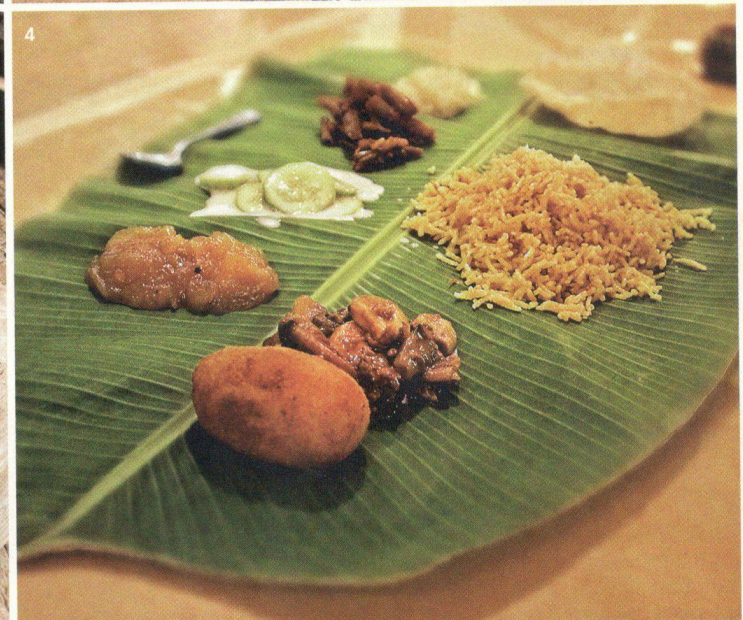
1. Chettiar mansions come with dramatic architectural details like these entrance arches

2. A local procession is all sound and fury

3. Local craftsman have been carving teak for generations

4. A meal at The Bangala is a great way to taste Chettinad cuisine

Below: Terracotta figures at the local shrines



GREAT FROM Chennai

GREAT FOR

Reliving the life of the merchant princes of old

GO NOW

To catch old luxury and local colour (see Good to Know).

Your hosts at Saratha Vilas are French architects Michel Adment and Bernard Dragon, who have painstakingly restored and converted the mansion into

a heritage hotel and cultural centre. The eight massive bedrooms have artworks and antiques carefully sourced from around the region. And Michel and Bernard are now working with several groups, including UNESCO, to work their restorative magic over the rest of the Chettinad region. They also organise tours of the 'village', so you can look at the huge

mansions and go inside some of the better-restored ones. Each is unique, representing a range of architectural styles, from the French, to the Victorian to the art deco – all in the same structure. The almost-surreal mishmash of influences comes together to create something that draws students and enthusiasts from around the world.

Another cultural tour will also allow you access to local weavers, carriage-makers and the woodworkers of the Asari community who have been carving teak for generations; their forefathers helped built the mansions in the area.

And of course, do not leave the region without really getting your teeth into Chettinad cuisine (see Where to Eat); there is a reason why that chicken is so well known.

WORDS TEJ SAPRU

PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBHA NATHAN



TURN OVER FOR ALL YOU NEED TO GET THERE

5 EASY TRIPS SARATHA VILAS, CHETTINAD, TAMIL NADU

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: Chennai (420km)

Closest city: Madurai (100km)

Closest airports:

Tiruchirapalli International Airport (80km), **Madurai Airport** (110km). A return ticket from Chennai to Tiruchirapalli can be had for about ₹ 4,000. Saratha Vilas can organise a pick-up or drop for you at ₹ 2,200 with toll and parking.

Closest railhead: Chettinad Station (5km). Take the **16701 Rameshwaram Express** (leaves Chennai

Egmore 9.40pm, arrives Chettinad 6.54am; ₹ 547 Third AC). And return by the **16702 Chennai Express** (leaves Chettinad 8.51pm, arrives Chennai Egmore 6.30am; ₹ 547 Third AC). Arriving by train would allow you to see the 'raja's art deco station. The 'raja' was not a king, he was just the richest resident.

GETTING AROUND

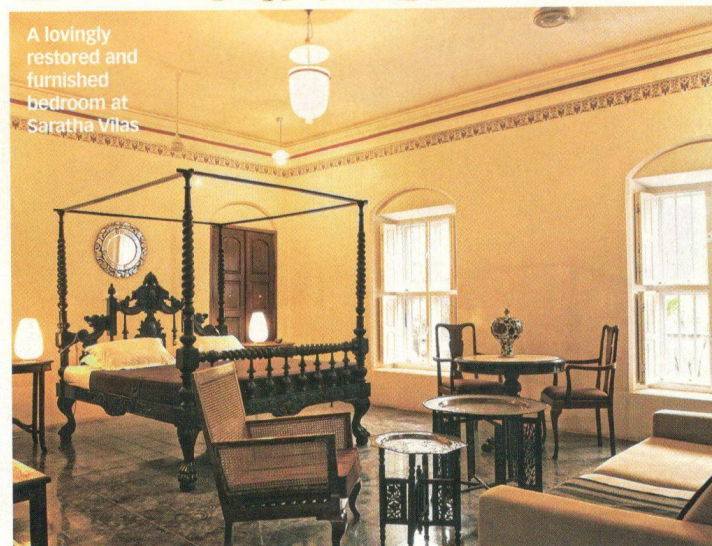
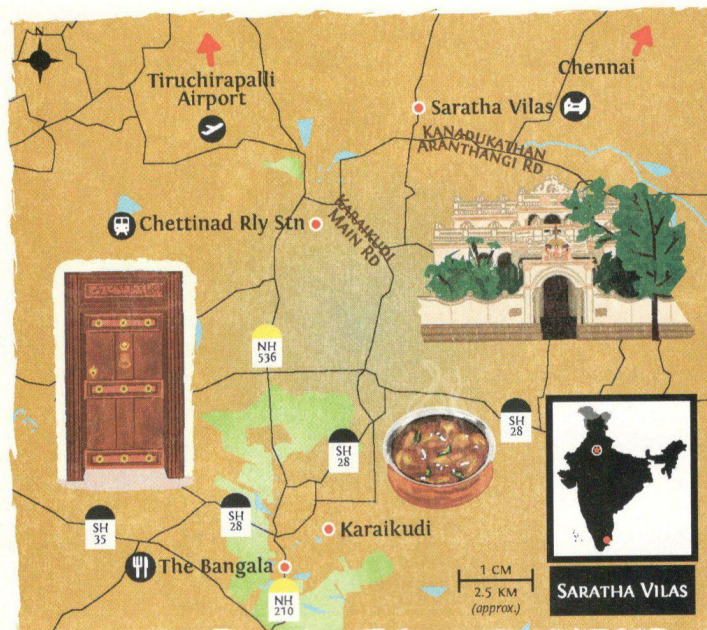
You will need a car to tour the area. Saratha Vilas can organise an AC Indica for ₹ 950 a day.

WHERE TO STAY

Saratha Vilas: Choose from three styles – ethnic, Victorian and 1930s – among the eight converted double bedrooms. The ethnic suites are the most modern looking, but all the rooms are contemporary to a certain extent, and blend seamlessly with the mansion (00-91-9884203175, 00-91-9884936158; sarathavilas.com, sarathavilas@hotmail.com; 832, Main Rd, Kothamangalam, Karaikudi Taluka, Sivagangai District; from ₹ 5,640 with breakfast).

WHERE TO EAT

Dining in at Saratha Vilas offers you a chance to taste both the famous local cuisine and the French food that is a happy result of Michel and Bernard's European heritage. Lunch is typically a Chettinad



meal, served on a banana leaf (₹ 400 veg, ₹ 500 non-veg per person) and dinner could be either traditional or continental, usually French (₹ 500 veg, ₹ 600 non-veg per person). Saratha Vilas's two cooks do it proud, but also visit **The Bangala** for more Chettinad food. Housed in an atmospheric, early 1900s building, it belongs to Meenakshi Mayyappan, a direct descendant of the Chettinad merchants; the food is prepared by her family chef of 40 years, and served on a banana leaf by waiters who keep feeding you till you lose count of the dishes. The meal is perfectly balanced, with cool cucumber in yoghurt balancing the spicy mutton pepper curry. You'll eat chicken, fried fish,

a selection of vegetables and pickles, ending with homemade ice cream and almond halva (00-91-4565-220221, 00-91-4565-250221; thebangala.com; Devakottai Rd, Senjai, Karaikudi; lunch/ dinner: ₹ 600 per person).

WHAT TO PACK

Slippers, since you will take off your footwear at the houses, shorts and tees

SHOPPING

The antiques market is a few streets lined with shops packed with items sourced from old houses. Because the Chettiars were such importers, you will find sofas, glasses, toys, utensils, literally anything, from Burma to former Czechoslovakia

and everywhere in between, and all from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most small items go for ₹ 150 to ₹ 500; prices for larger items increase exponentially. An antiquer will find something of great value (Muneeshwaram Kovil St, Karaikudi).

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Each room has an attached bathroom, and a separate shower. But be warned: the showers are literally in the bedrooms, and there is no door. So, unless you are already familiar with your travelling companion, showering is sure to be a come-clean affair!

SAFETY

Saratha Vilas is in the country, so dangerous bugs, snakes and scorpions come with the territory, but none have been actually spotted.

MEDICAL AID

Apollo Hospital can handle most emergencies (00-91-452-2580892/ 3/ 4; apollohospitals.com; Lake View Rd, KK Nagar, Madurai).

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

Children may not really enjoy this trip, unless they have a great interest in culture. There is no TV, but there are cycles and a carrom board at Saratha Vilas, as well as organised nature walks.

GOOD TO KNOW

- ◆ Saratha Vilas has wi-fi.
- ◆ Although Michel and Bernard are perhaps the best guides to the area, hire a guide if they are busy when you visit.
- ◆ The local shrines are built next to a sacred grove, which means that the fauna you walk through to get to them has been untouched for centuries.
- ◆ The next two months will see festivals to local deities that have locals piercing themselves with spears and trishuls.
- ◆ Saratha Vilas also organises an **Explore Chettinad tour** to Kanadukathan, Pallathur, Kothadi, Kottaiyur, Karaikudi and the Athangudi tiles factory (₹ 3,000 per person with guide, transport, and entry fees to the museum and houses).